

MONTY JAY

MY GAME
MY RULES
MY MASK

HOLLOW BOYS BOOK TWO

THE
TRUTHS

we burn



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To the Sage Donahue's of the world. Don't you dare apologize for becoming what you had to in order to survive. You forged yourself from the flames. Bow to no one.

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“Abandon all hope, ye who enter here!” - Dante Alighieri

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TRIGGER WARNING

I like for readers to go in blind for the sake of the plot, however, I felt it was necessary to state before that this is a dark romance. It deals with sensitive subject matter, sexual assault, graphic violence, gore, issues of religion, topics that some may find triggering and others. If you have a problem with any of these topics, please do not continue.

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PLAYLIST

King of Fools- Rafferty
Devils Backbone- The Civil Wars
Gangsta's Paradise- Coolio
Jungle- Emma Louise
Get Out Alive- Andrea Russett
Running (Dyin to live)- 2Pac
Animals- Living in Fiction
Runaway- Lil Peep
GO TO HELL- Clinton Kane
Talking Body- Don Vedda
This is War- Matthew Raetzel
Red Roses-Lil Skies
She Thinks of Me- Landon Tewers
Lucifer, My love- The Templars
DiE4u- Bring Me The Horizon
Die With Me- Gemini Syndrome
FEEL NOTHING- The Plot in You
Pretty Poison- Nessa Barrett
Empty Slow- Lil Mavi
Play With Fire- Sam Tinnez
Without Me- Fame on Fire
Wolf in your Darkness Room- Matthew Mayfield

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ACT I

morning star

*Most say Lucifer fell for his rebellion.
I say God's favorite of all the angels fell in love.
Captivated, enthralled, consumed with the only woman he could never have.
The only woman to exist.
Adam's first wife, Lilith.
He watched from the heavens, furious that Adam made her lesser. Refused to make her his equal, although they had been created from the same pit.
Oh, the fury that burned inside Lucifer when God punished Lilith for her rebellion against her husband, turning her into a demon.
And so, Lucifer fell.
Like lightning from the heavens, he fell.
So that he could raise the kingdom in the underworld. Carving a throne from the ashes of Hell, becoming a king.
Creating a home for Lilith. A place where he could make her more than an equal.
A place where he would make her his queen.*



CHAPTER ONE

genesis

rook - the past

Masochism.

Pleasure in being abused or dominated. A taste for suffering.

I always liked that definition—a taste for suffering. It's almost poetic, and I didn't know the Merriam-Webster dictionary could be anything but conventional.

While being dominated isn't something I necessarily enjoy in the bedroom or in life, I can always get down with a little scratch-and-bite action. For me, at least, it's less about domination and more about the hurting.

Some call it sadomasochism. That's what I like.

You see, I really love pain.

God, it's like the cure-all. The magic bullet. The ultimate escape.

The way bruises hover on my body and ache for days after. Sometimes I like to press them when they are still purple, just so I can remember where they came from, ya know?

I love the way pain explodes inside my skin, reminding me of all the things I deserve punishment for. The constant reminder that even on Earth, we must all pay for our sins.

Hell would be a walk in the park.

I practically ruled it.

"It's all your fault, Rook." His voice stings like coals against the soles of my feet. "The *Lord* examines the righteous, but the wicked, those who love violence, he hates with a passion!"

"Then shouldn't he hate you as much as he hates me?" I spit back.

A son is supposed to be his father's proudest achievement. I am his reckoning.

The straightlaced, self-righteous lawyer had disappeared the fucking second he passed the threshold of this house. The tie had loosened, his hair disheveled from pacing, and I can smell his whiskey-coated breath as I walk away from the kitchen, headed to the front door.

“Don’t you dare walk away from me, you bastard!”

Sometimes it’s not even the physical pain I need. I enjoy verbal abuse; it bites into me just as deep, just as brutal, making my toes curl, my body light up with chill bumps. It’s the only time I feel normal.

And nothing has been normal since I was seven.

Before I was excommunicated from my own father.

My scalp burns as he curls his fingers into the back of my scalp, gripping my thick hair and jerking me back into his space. Damn, man, I should cut this mop.

The earlier Bible verse rubs my skin raw, blistering my bones. Violence done without the name of God is something hideous, but as long as you’re quoting scripture before beating your son, it’s alright.

It’s holy, the work of prophets.

If we were going by Dante’s rules, I’d fall just above my father, spending eternity in the river of boiling blood in the seventh circle of Hell, while he walks for eons in the pits of hell, dancing in the sixth ditch of Malebolge.

Was any of it true?

Did sins rank worse in the underworld? Different punishments given based on your crimes against humanity?

“Pulling fucking hair? What are we doing now—we in a bitch fight?” My words are simply fuel to the already raging fire inside of him.

I could fight him back when he tosses me to the ground, do more than catch myself as my palms dig into the wooden floor, keeping me from banging my head on the hard surface, but I don’t.

His wingtip shoe punches into my ribs, making me grunt at the abruptness of the discomfort. I roll to my back, breathing out with a grin and staring up at the ceiling, wondering if God is laughing the way I am right now, happy that the devil is being punished on earth.

My laugh comes out cold and breathless.

It’s amazing what you find funny when you’ve seen what I have. When you’ve been through what I have. Comedies featuring Seth Rogan and

Will Ferrell just don't do it for me anymore.

"You're getting old," I choke out. "I can barely feel these now. You should hit the gym."

"Ah!" he yells loudly, charging down on top of me, both knees on either side of my chest, his fist connecting solidly with my face. I taste the blood from my split lip, the metallic sting warming my tongue. "I should just kill you! You should have died—it should have been you!"

Throbbing pain shoots through my skull as he grabs the front of my shirt, picking up my upper half from the ground only to toss me straight back down. Damn, that's going to give me a headache.

Over and over again, he lifts me up just to sling me back down. I'm swimming in my head, stars dancing in the corners of my eyes. Another concussion added to the growing list of injuries received from the man who created me.

"Then do it! Kill me!" I shout in my haze, feeling every ounce of this. Drowning in it. Allowing it to submerge me completely.

I hear his heavy breathing when he stops shaking me, and I stare up at the man who once taught me how to throw a baseball, who would toss me up on his shoulders so I could see over crowds, a man who used to look at me with fatherly love.

Now all I see inside of his eyes is the bloodshot misery I put there. The anguish I gifted him. I'd killed the part of him that believed in happiness, in good, in everything light.

This is my land of atonement.

This is what makes the pain feel so fucking good.

Knowing I deserve it.

"I hate you." He seethes. Spit flies from his tongue and smacks me on the face. "You're nothing but the devil. You will pay for this, all your wickedness."

There it is.

My darling nickname. His favorite for me.

The devil.

El diablo.

Lucifer.

I had been an angel once, when I was a kid, before I was cast out of the good graces and left to burn.

Church used to be somewhere I didn't mind going. When my mother was alive, and we were all happy. Now I'd catch fire walking through the door.

We stay there, staring each other down with enough contempt and fury to power New York City during a goddamn apocalypse. Deep breathing and damning history that will never be washed cleaned from our memories.

I have taken the man who thinks logically and analytically, turned him into a brash, impulsive beast. I made him into an older version of myself, both of us caught in our own version of purgatory.

I've ruined my father.

And every day he makes me pay for that. With his hands, his words, his religion.

A blaring horn seems to snap him back to a bit of his sanity as I swallow, trying to shove the dryness down my throat. "Welcome to the club."

I push his hands off me as he climbs off my body, leaving me lying there without a hand to help me up. Not like I thought he would assist me, but it was worth noting.

Even at seventeen, I stand taller than him as I rise to my feet. A couple of inches allows me to stare down at him, my hair falling in front of my eyes some. "At least have the balls to finish the fucking job next time."

His shoulders heave as he takes breaths, coming back to reality. He stalks to the kitchen to grab the whiskey glass on the table, raising it to his lips and pouring it down his throat.

The irony of it all is that he grabs his Bible off the counter next to it.

"You think God is going to help you while you're drowning your liver? Gluttony is pretty high up on his lists of what not to do."

I might be a bastard, but at least I'm not a hypocrite.

Ignoring my statement completely, he states, "Don't you question my faith, son. And I don't want you hanging out with them anymore. Burning down that willow tree was the last straw, Rook. You have no idea the strings that needed to be pulled to clear you of that."

I chuckle, grabbing my hoodie from the back of the couch. I pull it over my head, tugging it down my body. "Final straw. First straw. Doesn't matter, man." Turning to face him as I walk backwards, I spread my arms wide. "You can't keep me from them. It'll never happen. Just like I can't

keep you from polishing off that entire bottle tonight. Remember, I'm the devil. The devil does as he pleases.”

I don't bother denying the tree. He knows I did it. Hell, everyone knows I did it. But without any proof, with no witnesses, there isn't shit they can do, and that is the beauty of it all.

Walking around knowing everyone sees me as a chaotic arsonist, from the police to teachers—they all know what I am.

The Antichrist is what they call me. Pooled from the loins of Satan. Hell on planet Earth, or in this case, hell for Ponderosa Springs.

I love it.

How they clutch their rosary when I walk by. Whisper three Hail Marys because just glancing at me is a sin.

I love that they know all the things I've done and can do nothing to stop me. Not now, not ever.

There is no stopping me.

Stopping us.

And you know what? Fuck that tree.

He looks at me, dead eyes full of disgust. “You make me sick.” He grabs the neck of his whiskey bottle and walks away to the den, not speaking another word to me before I leave.

I tug the door open, slamming it behind me with a thud, not missing a beat as I walk down the driveway towards Alistair's car. The tinted windows shield his hateful ass from me, but I already know there is a permanent scowl awaiting me behind the glass, even if he's in a good mood.

Slipping into the passenger seat, I lean back into the headrest with a deep breath. There is a pause of silence, and I can feel Alistair staring at the side of my face.

“Is there something I can help you with, Caldwell?” I ask, still looking forward.

“Yeah, you have blood on your fucking chin. Clean that shit up.” He reaches into the glove box, tossing white napkins into my lap.

I take them easily, wiping at my chin. The red stains them almost immediately. Tomorrow, the cut will be nothing but a dull ache, and in a few days, I'll probably peel the scab back just to feel it hurt all over again.

Unless he hits me again and splits it back open.

Either way.

“I spar with you almost every other day. You can hit him fucking back.”

Rubbing harder to make sure it’s all off, I respond, “I can handle it.”

He shakes his head, pulling out of the driveway and heading towards the Peak to meet up with the other guys. The last few days of summer are fading to black, senior year of high school slowly approaching, and I’m not looking forward to seeing so many faces.

I spend ninety percent of my time surrounded by the same four people, and I’d like to keep it that way.

I reach into my black jeans for my pack of Marlboro Reds and pull one stick from the pack.

“It’s not about you handling it. I’m aware you can take a punch. It’s the fucking principle, Rook. How are you just going to sit back while your dad beats the shit out of you?”

Balling up the napkin, tightening my fist around the material, and tossing it onto his floorboard, I lean back and shut my eyes. Out of habit, I flick the Zippo through my fingers, rolling it around a few times before striking the flint and putting the flame to the tip.

“How about you let me worry about my father, alright? I’m fine. One more year and we’ll be off at college, far, far away.” I inhale the smoke deep into the bottom of my lungs. “I’ve been dealing with this since I was a kid. I can do one more year. So just drop it, bro.”

An aggravated grunt fills the car before I watch him press his foot farther onto the accelerator, and I barely blink when we hit eighty-five and climbing. If we die in a crash, we die in a crash.

Everyone ends up in the same place at some point, six feet under. Doesn’t matter how we get there.

Ya see, we all feel the same way. Well, all of us except for Silas’s lovestruck ass.

Thatcher, Alistair, and I want out of this town so damn bad we would claw our way through barbed wire to get there. Even if it means dying. We *will* get out of this place. Each of us has different reasons, but it all comes down to the history that’s attached to us. The memories we can never escape here because this town is a coffin.

It suffocates you with your past, never letting you move on. Never letting you forget.

“I hate when you say ‘bro.’ It’s fucking annoying.”

I laugh, pulling my hood onto my head. “Yeah, well, I hate when you’re a grouchy asshole, but that’s not changing anytime soon.”

“Whatever, smartass.”

Music drowns out our voices as we tear down the road. Alistair has mad control issues, so until we reach our destination, I’m stuck listening to metal, which is fine every once in a while. But my ears start getting numb after the seventh guitar solo. For two people who are so close, our musical tastes couldn’t be more different.

My eyes find the pines that blur together outside of the window. We fall farther and farther away from the town limits. Just before we enter the next shitty small town, he hooks a right, taking us down a dirt path hidden between towers of trees.

I spot Thatcher’s and Silas’s vehicles as the sun falls beyond the horizon, already parked. We pull in next to them and get out, walking the rest of the way to the edge of the cliff.

The Peak is a small piece of land on the coast, overlooking the deep blue waves of Black Sands Cove, a small beach where locals spend most of their summer months. Our spot is secluded, overlooking those below us. It’s where we come to hang out most of the time because we don’t exactly enjoy being home.

It’s always better to just be away from our parents. Alone, with each other.

“RVD! Thank heavens, Thatcher is seconds away from torching his eyebrows off.”

Her voice is smooth, softer than any of ours, and it can only belong to Rosemary Donahue.

The rich girl with enough balls to be seen with us and the only person who calls me by my initials. The only person I know willing to risk her reputation for the guy she loves. A sister to all of us. She infiltrated our group before we even had time to realize there was an intruder amongst us. I look over to her in Silas’s lap, both of them sitting in a chair beside a circular stack of wood.

Her auburn hair catches the wind, hitting him in the face, but I know he doesn’t mind it.

“The lack of confidence in me is a bruise to my ego, Rosie,” Thatcher responds, holding a can of lighter fluid.

“Bullshit,” Silas scoffs. “There is no bruising that massive ego.”

Thatch is good at a lot of things—talking his way out of a mass murder, winning the hearts of millions, stabbing things—but starting fires is a little too messy for the clean freak.

“Take a seat, Thatch. We don’t need you ruining your hair.”

I receive a middle finger as I take the container from him, letting him walk past me to his seat. Placing my dart between my lips, I squirt the liquid in a circle around the wood, swirling it into the center, making sure each piece has fuel on it.

Excitement pools inside my stomach, knowing what’s coming in a matter of seconds.

Fire is a key element in my existence. Every strike of a match, every flick of a flame is a compulsion. There is no stopping it. I’m always thinking about it, dreaming, contemplating it.

The way some people are driven to kill others, obsessed with cleaning or locking their door eight times before bed, that twitchy itch in your hands—that’s what happens to me without it.

Fire is my flesh. My bones. It’s my home.

It’s my way of balancing myself out.

Getting the shit kicked out of me for punishment can be demeaning, but controlling one of the most unpredictable elements in nature, that’s an unruly amount of power.

Every single time it burns, I feel content. A warmth spreads across my chest, down my arms, all the way to my toes. It brings me back to a time of remembrance when my life wasn’t a rotting dumpster fire.

And I’ll spend the rest of my life chasing that high.

My pyromania is the drug and the cure.

I flick the cigarette into the center of the wood, watching the cherry connect with the lighter fluid. There it is, the spark that starts it all. A buzzing fills my head as it catches, combusting together until the flames reach higher and higher.

Every piece of wood is soaked with dark orange, the heat making my skin sweat as the flames reach right above my chest.

I could fucking come just staring at it. Thinking about the destruction it would bring to the town, the people inside of it, the capability of damage it holds. And in that moment, I feel like the only person who could control it.

I take my seat between Alistair and Thatcher, tilting my head back and shutting my eyes for a moment, listening to everyone else talk.

“Are you four going to be at the homecoming fundraiser before school starts this year?” Rosemary asks naively.

“Possibly,” Alistair answers. “Probably not in the way you’d like us to, but it is a possibility.”

I grin, knowing what we have planned for that stupid fucking fundraiser.

“Nothing too illegal, okay? I don’t feel like bailing my boyfriend out of jail.”

“As if we’d ever get caught,” Thatcher adds.

“Maybe you can join us this go around, Rose,” I add, joking obviously because of her overbearing boyfriend who happens to be my best friend. “Might be fun.”

I can practically hear his grip tighten around her waist and his teeth grind from across the crackling fire.

“Over my dead fucking body. She stays out of the shit we do when night falls in Ponderosa Springs,” Silas says.

“When night falls? Is this where we scoot in closer and tell ghost stories?”

“Fuck off, Rook. You know what I mean. She doesn’t need to get involved with that shit.”

“I can handle myself, you know, and like Rook said, it might be fun, babe,” Rose argues, and I just know Silas is going to ream my fucking ass later for even bringing it up, so I might as well keep it going.

“See? Let the girl live, Si.”

“Remind me why I’m friends with you again?”

Laughter resounds into the night from four of the closest people to me. Laughter is such a strange sound for me, something so normal and human. You’d never think we would be the kind of people capable of the things we’ve done, the things we would do.

We are bad people who do very bad things. Very well.

I sigh, tossing my hands behind my head. “Because you need me,” I say. “Who are we without each other?”

The question soaks into their skin. While all of us have our own secrets, ones that we’ll take to our grave, there is a mutual understanding that connects us. One that others would never comprehend.

A darkness, a hunger that lives inside each of us.

Separately, we are just kids born with tragedy leaking from our split veins.

Together, we are utter chaos.

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CHAPTER TWO

and... action!

sage

“You heard about what she did, right? That’s the reason we have a new principal this year. She was humping her way through sophomore year!” Mary tosses her arms into the air, a perfect pout on her lips, letting her glue stick fall out of her hands and onto the floor of my room.

“Meanwhile, I’m over here busting my cute ass. I’m taking every single advanced placement they allow, running two clubs, not to mention cheer. I should be student body president dammit!”

For the past two weeks, all I’ve heard from her is how Stacy rigged the votes last year, how she slept with the principal—I think yesterday it was a teacher. It’s starting to sound like nails on a chalkboard, and if I’m not careful, blood is gonna start leaking from my eardrums.

“As if it matters, Mary.” Liz’s blonde pony sways behind her as she focuses hard on the television, some soccer game going on behind our friend’s personal crisis. “It’s student body president. It’s not the end of the world.”

“Oh my God, Lizzy I know you didn’t just say that to me. The girl who cried for three days after winning a state-qualifying game ’cause you didn’t score?”

The never-ending game of who can out-petty who. The direction this is headed is south at eighty miles an hour. I’m tired of hearing it—if she keeps dwelling, it’ll become her catalyst this year.

“Can you pull it together for five seconds?” I say, looking over at them, popping my fruit-flavored gum. “You’re a fucking Turgid, for fuck’s sake. You wipe your tan ass with hundred dollar bills. Suck it up.”

Tough love isn’t always popular, but it prepares you for the life you are set to lead in a town like this.

They should know better.

I know Mary wants to snap back at me, bite with some snarky remark that she hasn't even come up with yet, but she won't. Because as mean as she gets, she knows I can always get worse.

Because I'm Sage Donahue.

Rich bitch was pumped straight into my umbilical cord in the womb. I'm the cheer captain and everyone's favorite sweetheart.

Man-eater.

Heartless.

I'd become everything I needed to survive the standards of Ponderosa Springs and then some.

Lizzy Flannigan and Mary Turgid have been the perfect set of friends for the world I live in. Superficial to the core, but great for projecting a certain image.

Most little girls look for friends who have similar tastes. They enjoy the same dolls or like playing dress-up, but when you are groomed to have an eye for how others perceive you, you search out those with the most to lose.

My mother taught me early that your image is everything. Your reputation here will make or break you anywhere. You do what needs to be done, no matter the consequence.

You smile, no matter what they do to you. No matter the pain that is inflicted, because no one cares.

Not even the woman who gave birth to me.

I've become very good at keeping my inner self hidden from those around me, only allowing them to see what I want them to, making myself just trustworthy enough that I've become a collector of sorts.

A connoisseur of secrets, bones buried beneath the floorboards of people's closets. I have dirt on nearly everyone here, and they know if they cross me, it would take no time for me to shine a light on them.

In seventh grade, Lizzy came over bawling, pouring her guts out about how her dad is a massive alcoholic who spends too much extra time on his business trips, making sure to stop at all the illicit clubs on the way back. She was so red-faced, so frustrated that her mother would just sit there, knowing all of this, aware of every single indiscretion, and never mumbled a single word.

She vowed that night to never let a man disrespect her, refusing to marry someone who stomped on her like that. Which I personally don't think is a problem because I also happen to know Lizzy isn't into men at all.

During a drunken sleepover, while Mary was passed out, Liz felt like sharing more secrets. I respected her for being able to say it, and I hated that she knew she had to hide it. But here, she'd be crucified.

And Mary? Oh, Mary.

She's smart as a tack, will probably be a neuroscientist one day, if she can pass the drug tests. Because the last time I checked, it's frowned upon to have Adderall in your system when you're not prescribed it.

The entirety of her life, she's cared about her grades, holding her intelligence higher than anything else about her. If that was ever threatened? I felt sorry for the person doing the threatening. Freshman year, she got a C on a math test. Not a big deal for some, but to her? To her parents? It might as well have been an expulsion from school.

So when her eyes refused to stay open from the hours of studying, she found her golden ticket. Now, she disappears during free periods to meet the sketchy dealers beneath the bleachers of the football field.

We all have weights on our shoulders here, each of us lying beneath our own pendulum that sways closer and closer each time we slip up.

It's the reason they'll never try to dethrone me as Miss Ponderosa Springs. They're terrified I'll spill their secrets. Because the Sage they know will be merciless when it comes to getting what I want.

There is a power in that. Knowing everyone's secrets, all their truths.

Even more power in knowing not a single soul knows any of mine.

The more secrets I have on everyone else, the less likely they are to find out mine. And mine are going to stay buried.

"Yeah, you're right." She sighs, smiling tightly. "Just a mini freak-out. It's just nerve-racking," She picks up her glue stick and continues to stick plastic letters to the thin white piece of cardboard, internally plotting on how to kill me somehow. "Not knowing if I'll get into Hollow Heights."

I scoff. "Then you go to any other Ivy League college in the country. It's not the only one in the world, Mary."

"You know just as well as I do you could major in janitorial activities there and come out making six figures. Getting in is everything, Sage."

I feel as if I have to physically reach up and grab my eyeballs to keep them from rolling.

Money, money, money.

That's everyone's favorite pastime here. It's all they care about.

They eat, shit, breathe it.

Money will fix everything because it buys silence.

"Yeah, yeah, Hollow Heights this, Hollow Heights that. Doesn't anyone want to see the sun? Is everyone just so content living in a place that is always gray and wet?" I complain, rolling off my bed and towards my adjoining bathroom.

I twirl my finger around a few loose curls in my hair, then open the drawer, grab my favorite balm, and tap it to my lips. Even though it's evening, my makeup is still perfectly in place, the pitch-black winged eyeliner creating the seamless Marilyn Monroe bedroom eyes. The red matte color sits on my lips, warming my skin. It all sits there, producing a well-polished mask.

To the girls, I look conceited as I gaze into the mirror at my reflection, but it's only to see if I can find any cracks in the in the façade.

"Bitch, please, your ginger ass will burn the minute you step out of Oregon," Lizzy jokes, making me grin to myself in the mirror.

"Your point?" I turn to them, placing my hand on my hip. "Red is my signature color, after all," I say, adding a wink for good measure.

We all share a laugh, a fake laugh full of plastic. And the sound echoes so deep inside my chest that I begin to wonder if it truly is as hollow inside as people believe it to be.

There is a loud hum from the engines of high-end sports cars. They purr and rumble outside the French doors of my room that make even Liz pull her eyes from the plasma screen on the wall.

Mary's eyes light up. "Looks like your delinquent side is home," she giggles, hopping off the ground and bolting to the doors. She cracks them just enough to hear what's going on below, peering through the panels to see. "And she brought her friends," she singsongs.

I pull my phone out of my back pocket, checking the time. "Whoa, they *can* tell time. She's not late for curfew tonight."

This never fails to happen, and it never fails to annoy me.

A constant reminder of all the things I've stayed away from, the things I was forced to avoid. All the freedoms Rosemary has, because I'm the one underneath the microscope.

I'm the one trying to keep it together. To not fall apart.

Liz moves to the window next to Mary, and because I'm shamefully nosey, I follow, peering over their shoulders to look down below at my front yard and the three expensive vehicles that have parked in a straight line outside our curb.

"Damn," Mary whispers as we watch my sister slip out of the passenger seat, waiting for Silas as he rounds the front of his Dodge Challenger and comes to her side. He wraps his arm around her shoulder, guiding her towards our front door.

"It's seriously unfair how hot he is," she whines, admiring Silas Hawthorne's golden skin that is flawless any time of day, but at night in that white t-shirt, it's to die for.

"That man needs a warning label," Lizzy adds, her eyes quickly darting to me as if to make sure I won't call her out.

"More like a straitjacket," I mutter, flipping my hair over my shoulder in annoyance.

You see, this happens every time they show up to drop Rosemary off. Like a pack of starving dogs, there is never just one of them. They all gather like strays for scraps. However, my friends can't help but stand at this window just itching to get a glimpse at Ponderosa Springs' criminally insane and psychotically hot. Of course, we wouldn't be caught dead talking to them in person both for their reckless attitudes and because being seen with any of them is a black mark on anyone's reputation for the entirety of your life here.

It's social fucking suicide.

They aren't the boys you bring home to mommy and daddy. They are fun to look at, but under no circumstances do you touch.

Kind of like the way you'd admire wild animals in nature. You look, you appreciate, you leave them alone. You're not supposed to take them home and keep them as pets. Yet, my twin sister doesn't mind getting mauled by one of them when they snap because everyone knows you can never truly domesticate some creatures.

We can barely hear what they are saying to each other at the front door, but it's been over ten minutes, and I'm getting bored. As many times as Rose has tried to explain it, I'll never understand why him.

Actually, no, that's a lie.

It's because he's the one person she's not supposed to choose, and she has always tried to do the exact opposite of what is expected of her, in turn making my life a living hell. My parents had given up on her, decided she wasn't worth molding, so years ago, their attention shifted directly onto me.

I am their crown jewel.

The honking of a horn snaps my attention away like a rubber band against wet skin. I see Thatcher's platinum-blond hair from a mile away, even in the dark. It's a girl's dream to have hair that natural blond color.

"Rosie, darling, if I promise to have him back in one piece, will you please return our friend for the night?" His voice is swift and clean like a scalpel against skin, slicing through the wind.

I hear soft laughter from my sister, and it's almost strange because it's like hearing my own real laugh, something that hasn't come from my throat in a very long time.

"I saw on a crime documentary that psychopathy is genetic," Lizzy says as we all watch him.

"The psycho gene is just a myth—it's never been scientifically proven. It's about your environment, the way you were brought up, and some mental behavior, but you can't pass it on to your children," Mary adds.

"And what do you think his environment was like, Mary? Hugs and family game nights?" I say, "Everyone knows Thatcher Pierson will be turning into daddy dearest soon enough. I'm just waiting to see if anyone catches him sparkling in the sun."

They laugh loudly at my comment, knowing I'm right. I don't believe serial killers pass anything on to their children besides trauma. But I know what's it like to be raised like you're a monster. Eventually, you give in and turn into one.

The windows of the next car in line roll down, allowing me to catch a glimpse of Alistair Caldwell in his driver's seat.

"Shame he hates the world so much. He would have made the perfect trophy boyfriend," I say with a shake of my head. I mean, his family owns

most of the town—we would have been great if he wasn't five shades of fucked-up.

"Because Easton Sinclair isn't already perfect? Do you see the girls that swarm him like flies, ready to take him right off your hands?"

"Like you, Mary?" I arch a well-manicured eyebrow at her, and she turns her flushed face, trying to think of a way to backtrack and deny.

It's not lost on me that Mary has been thirsting over Easton since preschool, and the moment we split, she'll be there, legs spread, ready to pick up the pieces. Not like I care—Easton is there for the same reason they are.

Placeholders until I graduate.

"Kidding," I add at the end, smirking a bit.

Then, like the explosion he is, Rook Van Doren slides his lean body through Alistair's passenger window, hanging outside of the car as he sits on the doorframe, grinning widely, a match dangling from his pink lips.

"Romeo, Romeo, where art thou Romeo?" he chides. "You'll see him tomorrow. We got some sketchy shit we need to take care of tonight." His jokester voice rings in the air as he drums his hands on the roof of the car. There isn't a single thing he takes seriously.

"Yeah, jackass, that's definitely going to comfort her tonight," Silas's voice calls back.

"Sorry, was I supposed to lie? It's not like we're going to bake cupcakes."

The streetlights bounce off his pale skin, the yellowish-orange glow warming his face. Industrial flames glow around him. Those pretty-boy features make him look so unassuming, that sorta wild hair and brazen look that reminds me of wild mustangs. Free, reckless, dangerous. I've heard at least five girls complain about how jealous they are of his long eyelashes that frame his hellfire eyes.

I've never seen them up close, but that's what everyone calls them.

Hazel on anyone else, but his? They scorch you.

Something that I've always admired and simultaneously drives me up the wall about Rook is how unpredictable he is.

You never knew what you'll get from him. A smile, a Molotov cocktail, a knife in the back, a laugh. The only boy in their group that you can't prepare for is him. Everyone knows Thatcher is supremely intelligent

and that, if given the opportunity, he might lock you in his basement and play Dr. Hannibal with your body parts.

God, and if you weren't aware of Alistair's anger issues, climb out from under the gigantic fucking rock you're sleeping under and look at him. He's practically bathing in wrath-scented cologne.

And of course, everyone is aware that Silas is the quiet one. The schizo doesn't say much because he is too busy inside his own head.

He's the one my sister was able to crack.

But Rook, he's identical to the element he so fondly associates himself with. Nothing he does is deliberate; it's always on a whim, probably based on whatever feels right at the moment for him. The boy has never thought twice about anything.

I admire it because he has the balls to do it. I find it stupid because he's going to wind up getting himself killed, and being that crazy is only fun when you have the money and power to avoid the consequences.

The psycho.

The vengeful one.

The schizo.

And the devil.

The Hollow Boys.

Irritated and done snooping, I step back from the window. "I'm going to grab something to drink. Try not to cream your panties before I get back."

Making my way down the steps and through our living room, I hear my mother's glossy voice echo. My feet slow so she doesn't hear me coming. I walk until I reach the edge of the kitchen entry, listening to her on the phone.

"I just don't know what to do anymore, Sherry. I mean, she's hopeless! She was always rebellious as an infant, but sleeping with Silas Hawthorne? God, I can't imagine what the people at church think when they see us. He hangs out with a boy the town calls the Antichrist," she whines emphatically.

My ears ring while she continues. "We've tried grounding her, and she just sneaks out. Ugh, and the weight! You should see the weight she has put on since she met him. It's awful!"

The water starts to bubble at my feet.

A flood warning signals in my head, and I know what's coming.

If she would just stay away from him like I told her, this wouldn't be happening. Our own mother wouldn't be speaking about her daughter like this. The water wouldn't be rising this quickly, and my lungs wouldn't be shaking.

"Sage is fine. I mean, at least we have one child who cares about this family's image. Just as long as she can refrain from screwing it up." Her footsteps move away from me, telling me she's heading out the opposite side towards the den.

My heart pounds in my chest, my nails digging into the palm of my hand. Every time Rose screws up, every time she bends the rules, it's like they push my head further and further beneath the surface.

The drowning is coming. I can feel it.

When awful things happen, some people become dainty, soft wallflowers that grow in the corners, waiting to be plucked by their Prince Charming.

And some people become warriors.

They forge themselves with iron, building layers of armor to protect what remains. They become hard.

Mean.

Angry.

Jealous of the ones who are able to reconstruct themselves without the bitter shards of glass from their trauma.

The front door opens, the wind brushing her dark auburn hair that is several shades darker than my own from her hair dye behind her shoulders. Her smile would light up an actual fucking room if you could convert it into electricity, and that should make me happy.

It doesn't.

"Huh," I say, crossing my arms in front of my chest. "I thought the trash only came on Tuesdays."

Rosemary's eyes raise to find my own. The oversized hoodie that belongs to her boyfriend swallows her small frame. The smile falls, and she sighs.

"Save the bitchy remarks for your friends." She pulls the hood up, walking into the kitchen to avoid me, but I follow.

I know I should walk away, leave before I say anything worse, but I can't stop myself.

“Funny. The schizo teaching you how to have a backbone now, or are you just feeling feisty tonight?”

“Don’t call him that,” she says, slamming the refrigerator door. “What is your problem with them anyway? They’ve never even bothered you!”

My tongue becomes swift, sharp, lethal in a matter of moments.

What is my problem? My problem?

“They are scum, Rose. It makes this family look dirty!” I shout back.

“Does Mom have her hand shoved up your boney ass so far that she’s using you as a puppet now? You know, if I didn’t know better, I’d say you were jealous.”

“Jealous? Me? Of what? Your gang of mentally unstable assholes? Please,” I scoff defensively.

What would I have to be jealous of? I have everything I could possibly imagine.

“Jealous that I have *real* friends. A real relationship. While you spend your days with fake boyfriends and whack-ass people who would stab you in the back the moment you turned around. All because you’re too afraid to upset Mommy dearest!” she snaps, shaking her head.

“Ya know, maybe I wouldn’t have a problem if you’d stop opening your legs for the freaks of Ponderosa Springs. God, don’t you see the way people look at you? You’re a walking carnie show attraction!” I sneer.

She flinches, biting back like I’d slapped her across the face, sadness filling her eyes. I tell myself she deserves to hurt like I do. Here I am drowning every second I’m living this life, and she hasn’t got a care in the world. Some harsh words won’t kill her.

Rose steps closer to me. “No, that’s your problem, Sage. Maybe if you’d stop caring what people thought of you, you wouldn’t be such a miserable bitch.” Walking straight through me, she nudges me with her shoulder as she passes.

She leaves me there, coming down from my temper trip, my heart aching inside my chest. I fall against the wall, my legs feeling like they might give out, but I refuse to let them.

The ice-cold water is right below my nose, and I try to keep it from seeping into my mouth. I refuse to do this right now.

I inhale and exhale deeply through my nose, continuing the process until my heart rate slows and the water starts to reside.

I repeat over and over again:
I am Sage Donahue.
I have everything.
I will not drown.
I will survive.

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CHAPTER THREE

the book of the scorned

rook

“Your aim sucks.” Silas looks over at me while smoke rolls from the tip of my tropical-flavored Swisher Sweets.

I place the wrap on my lips, holding it there, pointing the paintball gun up at the football teams’ scoreboard. We’re lying a few feet back from it, the Astroturf digging through my jeans, practically burning my ass.

“I said yes to vandalism. I never said I would be good at it.” I puff on the end of the blunt, letting the funky-smelling smoke soak into my lungs, giving me that feel-good high I need every once in a while.

It’s not about numbing anything; it’s about curbing the impulse. For a few hours, that itch on my palm is sated just enough to let me get through the day without blowing someone up.

I’ll see a guy being a douche or just walking down the street with an arrogant smirk on his face, and all I can think about is what he’d do if he were wrapped in flames, drowning in gasoline. That’s normal to me. It’s odd to me that no one else thinks that way.

Weed is keeping me from being homicidal.

Plus, it fills up the emptiness for a while. All the smoke makes me feel less of a void.

I shoot the lime-green paintballs onto the board, creating more of a mess on the already coated object. You can barely see what’s beneath the yellow and green paint, and with football already into preseason, they’re not going to be happy about it.

“Feels a little like a rite of passage, doesn’t it? Last prank on the football team,” I say, coughing a bit, my head light and my body humming with awareness. The warm summer air is starting to get colder every day we

approach fall. “I fucking hate this place, man, but it’s the last year of all of us together. Last of everything.”

Silas remains aloof, showing little emotion, not because he doesn’t have any, but because he doesn’t like expressing them. He very rarely reacts to things that normal people would, and even though I know he loves Rose and cares about us, I know relationships are tough for him.

Relating to people. Understanding them.

He’s different—he sees the world in a different scope than everyone else, and he sometimes looks like he doesn’t care about anything, always seeming humorless or emotionally cold.

Even when he’s with Rose and she smiles, it’s maybe a lift of his lips, but he never really shows he’s happy, unless you look at his eyes.

I think that’s how Rosemary wiggled her way into his heart. She could read in his eyes what his face would never express. She saw all the way inside of him and took that information and tried to understand it.

Truth is, no one would ever really know what’s in Silas’s mind. We’d never be able to relate to it, but I can try to protect him from it. Even if he hates me bugging him about taking his meds.

Because he protects me.

Well, a truth of mine.

“There are cars,” he says as the whistle of bullets rattle my ears, more paint exploding against the sign. “Planes. Trains. Subways. Lots of ways to travel, Rook. It’s not the last of anything—we just have to get jobs, and you won’t be able to burn down buildings anymore.”

I laugh, feeling it build in my stomach as the effects of the weed start to crest. I mean, he’s right, and I know I’m overthinking ’cause of the pot, but it’s still a scary feeling for me.

The word “family” was lost the day my mom died.

And found again at a country club while I was trying to blow up firecrackers.

Leaving Ponderosa Springs was never a question, but leaving them, that’s a different feeling.

“And you’re still set on staying? Can’t talk you out of it?” I ask, even though I know he has no reason to leave, not like I do.

“Nah, I’m here until Rose graduates. She wants to go to Hollow Heights, so I’m with her until the end.” There is a bluntness in his voice,

calm, so dead set that even a stranger walking past would know he meant what he said.

“Your parents gonna be okay with that?”

“They’ve been trying to get me to leave since I was diagnosed.” He sighs. “They love me, so I get it. They never wanted to see me go through the ridicule here—they still don’t—but I’m not leaving Rose. So they also know there is no talking me out of it. Plus, it’ll be easier to intern at my dad’s company in Portland.”

He’s the only one with good parents. Great parents, even. Scott and Zoe are successful, happy with three sons, and love them in a way parents should.

Crazy that even someone with a steady environment can still crave destruction, isn’t it?

I take another hit, finishing it off and tossing the butt onto the field, knowing it will singe the shit out of the fake grass.

“Are we done being nostalgic? It’s hurting my head, and we gotta go pick up Rose.”

“Where is she?” I ask with a nod of my head, letting him know I’m ready to leave.

“Tilly’s, studying, but her sister’s boyfriend and his swarm of friends showed up, and I don’t like her being around them.”

“A chance to shit on Easton and I get a burger? Where do I sign?” I reach my arms above my head, stretching as I stand up.

“We are going to collect Rose, and that’s it. No fighting.” He grunts, walking in step beside me.

“Yeah, no fighting. Got it.” I grin as I reach into my back pocket, grabbing one of my Lucky Strike matches and placing it between my teeth.

I wouldn’t start anything. I usually never do.

But I would finish it.

Tilly’s Diner is a short drive from the high school, and when I’m on my bike, it takes maybe six minutes to pull into the parking lot with the neon sign illuminating the asphalt.

I shake my hair out of my eyes when I pull my helmet over my head, swinging my leg over the bike while Silas pulls into the parking space next to mine. Tilly’s is packed. Unsurprisingly, considering it’s a Saturday and

this is where every dude with Axe cologne lingers and girls ready to gossip congregate.

I feel sorry for Rose, for the fact her twin sister is a raging, ego-filled mean girl. And since Rose hates driving, most of the time she has to tag along with her. Even if she doesn't want to.

Her parents, I am guessing, think if they surround Rose with the "right" people, she'll see how bad we are for her. They think she'll get bored, see what her life could be if she ended up with the people on the right side of the moral scale, instead of the boys that are the tarnished stain of Ponderosa Springs.

In the years we've been alive, we've damaged the reputation of this town and its people. We've taken their hierarchy and clawed it to pieces. The Donahues are afraid their precious little girl has completely turned to the dark side.

They are right.

And they aren't getting her back.

Silas pulls the glass door open, stepping onto the checkered floor, and when we cross the threshold, all voices cease to exist. The fully packed diner becomes quieter than a mouse's footsteps.

We are the things that don't belong entering a place we are not welcome.

It's as if we've just walked into church or some place of worship.

And everyone knows, holy ground burns the feet of the damned.

I grab Silas's shoulder. "What? Is there something on my face?" My voice rings through the space, crackling and popping in their ears.

Some of them stare openly in shock; others hide their gazes, fearing that we'll make eye contact with them and possess them or do something wicked. Women grab their purses, men slit their eyes, girls tighten their thighs, and boys try to act tough.

Silas starts moving, stalking towards his girl with purpose. Her body is tucked into a small booth by herself. He wasn't joking when he said he wanted to get in and get out—he hates being around this many people. Even if he'd never said it out loud, I can see it in the way he holds himself.

I follow behind him, watching as her gentle eyes raise, meeting her boyfriend's. Everything fades for the two of them, the anxiety drops from her shoulders, and relief washes down his back like water.

Jealous isn't the word for what I feel about them. I don't like Rose like that, and I can admit when guys are attractive, but Silas doesn't do it for me like that.

But sometimes, very rarely, I wonder what it would feel like for someone to look at me like that.

Like I'm more than a problem. A mistake. A monster. Lucifer.

Someone who looks at me like I'm human.

Rose gathers her things quickly, sliding from her place in the booth, bringing my attention to the others around her. Members of the football team sit together, some of them on top of the booths themselves, their flavor of the week dangling on their arms.

In every way besides monetary, they are our opposites.

We are all rich, and that's where the similarities stop.

If there was a wrong side of the tracks in Ponderosa Springs, we'd be over there. All the while they stare over at us from their balconies and perfectly trimmed lawns, looking at us as if our clothes don't cost just as much, as if our families aren't just as affluent.

None of that matters because our wealth is covered by the stench of danger. Ruckus. Violence.

We're the people parents warned you about when you were growing up, the boogeymen beneath your bed. We are abominations to this merry-go-round town where everyone plays their part.

And nobody plays their parts better than the prince of all things high-and-mighty and his darling little princess that sits by his side.

"Hey, guys, ready to leave?" Rose mumbles, throwing her book bag over her shoulders as Silas pulls her into his chest, holding her to his body.

"Hey, Rosie girl." I reach forward, ruffling her hair. "Let's go find some trouble to get into, yeah?"

I'm joking obviously. Joking is the way I cover up the hollowness inside my chest. No one knows how the laughs echo inside of me. Because I have nothing left.

There is a light cough, followed by, "Lowlifes." It's low, muffled, and it causes the group to laugh under their breaths.

I roll my match across my upper row of teeth, grinning around it.

"Sorry, couldn't hear you with those cocks in your mouth. Wanna say that a little louder, Sinclair?" I step past my friends towards his side of the

booth.

Easton is as pretentious as Gucci flip-flops.

I've hated him since I met him—we all do. This mentality he carries that he's a god amongst others. The way people think he walks on water, and he fuels that kind of attention.

Whoop-de-fucking-do.

His father is the dean of an overpriced university that's sinking into the soggy ground. Hardly anything to brag over. But like most, Easton knows how to play the people here.

He smiles for the papers, wins football games, pretends he's hot shit.

But even perfect has cracks, and he's full of them.

"Rook." Rose grabs my forearm, doing what she does best and trying to keep the peace.

I laugh her off. "No, Rosie, it's fine," I start, putting my hands on their table, looking down at Easton. "I'm just having a friendly conversation with my good pal Sinclair here. Isn't that right?"

My eyes burn into his, daring him to make eye contact with me. I hope he does so he'll see what everyone else does—the pits of hell. How I'll roast him alive if he insults me or my family again.

Except he does what pussies do and looks everywhere but my gaze.

"I said—" He clears his throat, smiling through this uncomfortable position. "Have a good time." He shrugs it off as something lighthearted.

He and I both know what he said.

Bold for saying it in the first place.

Smart for not repeating it to my face.

"That's what I thought, champ." I slap his back, hard, knocking him forward a bit. When silence remains, I decide to give Rose what she wants and leave.

"What a joke," a softer, more graceful voice buzzes in my ears, "Bringing the insane clown posse in public, really, Rose? Could you be any more embarrassing?"

Pressure falls on the match in my mouth as I tighten my jaw.

"I wonder what that says about you and your crew of Abercrombie and bitch."

We make direct eye contact, and her blue-flame-colored irises battle with my own. Not for a second does she flinch, her gaze never leaving

mine.

Sage Donahue.

What a fun time it would be spinning you around my finger.

She laughs pointedly. “Ha, that’s good. Especially for a guy I thought read at a fifth-grade level.” Her pale blue nails swirl in her tall glass, filled to the brim with a pink-colored milkshake. “The fact she insists on defending you four, I wonder, is she naive or do you just like ruining her life?”

Rose and Sage are twins biologically, with similar hair color and freckles. But Sage’s are more sporadic, wildly thrown around her face, and Rose’s seem more compact to her nose. In the way Rose tries to blend in, Sage does everything to stand out.

It’s rare that I go toe-to-toe with Ponderosa Springs’ Sweetheart. The girl with a notorious silver tongue. Of course, we have known of each other; how could we not? Small town, plus my best friend is dating her sister.

But we never went out of our way to cross paths.

“It could be that she isn’t afraid of living her life outside of her bubble-wrapped world. Maybe she enjoys not having to pretend. The dark side allows for you to do things you’d never think of doing in the light.”

My gaze follows her scarlet-painted lips, the way she wraps them around her straw, staining the white material. She takes a few sips before pulling back to reply, “Is that supposed to be an insult?”

I smirk. “No.” I shrug, sarcasm covering my tone. “Every set of twins has a sheep. Nothing to be ashamed of. I’m glad you can own it, Sage.”

“Sheep?”

“Yeah, you know, the one who submits to everyone’s expectations. The meek. Feeble.” I take my time with each word, tilting my head a bit to see how she’ll react to them. “Powerless. Watered-down twin.”

Sage Donahue is able to cut everything and everyone down with one sentence from those red lips. They all bow to her, follow her—nobody ever questions her.

Easton Sinclair may believe he’s running the show, but she’s always been pulling the strings.

Anger sizzles in her eyes, and my smile only grows.

She is burning with rage at my response, fighting to keep her cool, unbothered exterior intact, but that snow-white skin is starting to melt underneath the pressure of my words.

The urge sweeps through me, something that normally only happens when I set a physical fire, but this time, power pours over me, knowing I've set flames into the pit of her stomach.

"And that's me? The sheep?" She arches her eyebrow, tossing that curtain of strawberry blonde hair over her shoulder.

"If the shoe fits, princess."

Something inside of her breaks—I see it, the flames contorting into a wildfire of emotion. Her mouth opens, ready to spill every harsh word she can possibly come up with.

I'm ready, ready to watch her erupt and explode all over me,

only to have it ruined by her boyfriend, who has stepped up to save the day.

"Alright, dickhead, that's enough. You're taking it too far." Easton stands up, but I don't bother moving from my hunched-over position on this table.

I simply glance over my shoulder, looking him up and down, running my tongue along the inside of my cheek. "Yeah? And what are you going to do about it, jockstrap?"

He might try to hire someone with daddy's money to fight me, but he'd never do it himself. Too bad for his reputation, too much of a pussy, and he knows I'd put him six feet under.

"Rook," Silas says behind me, "not in front of Rose."

"Yeah, you heard him, dog. Follow your leader and his bitch," Easton says, causing Sage to gasp as she grabs his forearm, jerking him back towards his seat.

I'm not the one who moves this time. Silas shifts so he's standing next to me. There are certain buttons you don't press when it comes to me and my friends. They're all different, but when you hit them, you get similar reactions.

"Watch your mouth."

Apparently, Easton had pumped himself full of testosterone today because he has enough balls to respond.

"Watch your mouth," he mimics, rolling his eyes. "You think you're tough? Walking around blasting emo music and wearing black? You're fucking pathetic. Freaks. No one is afraid of you."

“Guys, please, I just want to leave,” Rose whispers, pulling at our arms.

The match in my mouth snaps as Easton continues to dig his grave deeper and deeper.

“A son of a serial killer, a spoiled brat, a schizo, and a dude with a dead mom who apparently prayed to Satan. Congratulations, you’ve succeeded in becoming Ponderosa Springs’ very own freak show.”

I never was good at controlling myself.

Not my hunger, my lust, my anger, my urges.

I feel nails digging into the flesh of my arm, pulling me back, but all I can see is Easton Sinclair sweltering over a fire, begging me to put him out.

“Not here,” Silas mutters close to my ear. “Later.”

Letting this go is the last thing I want to do. I don’t want to back down. I don’t want to leave while he’s still wearing that smug grin on his face. But I know what will happen to him.

We always get our payback.

I cover my rage with a smile. “If you ever wanna back that pussy-ass mouth up, Easton, you know where to find me.”

My eyes cut to Sage, ignoring her shit sack of a boyfriend. “And you,” I start. “This was fun, doll. We should do it again.” I add a wink for good measure before I flick the match away, pluck the cherry out of her milkshake, and pop it in my mouth.

I chew the sweet fruit, watching as her diamond-cut jaw tenses as she peers over at me. I almost got her mask to crack, pushed her just a little too far, and I’d be lying if I said I’m not ready to watch the repercussion. For a few seconds, those eyes flick to my lips, watching the juice fall from my mouth.

Compulsive, menacing, heedless ideas circle my mind. I know I shouldn’t. I should leave her be. She’s the one girl I should not fuck with, but that makes her that much more enticing.

Sage is a poison apple. Too pretty for her own good, but could kill you with one single bite. Even at the thought of that, I’m still ready to sink my teeth into her.

I was never the one who thought things through. I act on impulse only, and right now, the only thing on my mind is showing her exactly what she’s been missing.

“I can’t wait for the day you come searching for trouble, princess. I’m gonna have so much fun with you.”

The cracking of skin against skin echoes in the space, my cheek burning from the contact she’d made with it. I still feel the way her nails dragged across me. The pain lingers on my skin, my chest throbbing for more.

I roll my tongue on the inside of my cheek, grinning smugly.

“Over my dead fucking body, pyro.” She seethes.

Yeah, I’m so going to enjoy watching her little boyfriend burn beneath my feet while I take his girl right out from underneath his fucking nose.

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CHAPTER FOUR

night terrors

sage

I used to get so annoyed in middle school when people would ask stupid questions about myself and Rose. Yes, we're twins, but that doesn't mean I can read her mind.

The constant *Where's your twin?* Always referred to as "the twins," even when you are by yourself.

It wasn't until high school that we became our own people, she was traveling in one direction and I headed towards the top of the food chain. We were no longer referred to as "the twins." Just Rosemary and Sage.

And there were times, like right now, when the moon was high and the dark covered my bedroom that I missed being attached to her. I missed being close to her in public, always being seen as one half of a whole.

Like clockwork, Rose's soft cries of sadness had woken me up. This happens almost every other night, and I'm not surprised to see the green glow of my clock reads 3:34. I let out a sigh as I sit up, stretching my arms, my script for *The Crucible* sliding off my bed as I move. With practiced footwork, I navigate my room without having to click the light on, opening my door and heading to the room directly beside mine.

I'd once heard our bedrooms are direct reflections of who we are on the inside, and if that's true, my twin sister and I are just as different as people think us to be.

Hers has band posters, potted plants, lots of black-colored clothing, and a night-light that projects stars on the ceiling, while mine is pink, organized, with lots of natural light and a fluffy white rug on the floor.

Parts of me that I keep locked away don't want to accept that we had fallen so far apart from one another.

Her voice reminds me of my reason for even coming inside here in the first place.

With ease, I move to her bed, slipping into the space next to her. The soft cotton sheets wrap me up, the smell of smoke and cologne stuck to the bed from Silas's hoodie she's wearing.

Using the tips of my fingers, I smooth the frown on her face, relaxing the muscles on her forehead. Dragging them down her nose, soothing her awake, I let her know that whatever monster she's running from in her head, he isn't real.

She moves with my touch, consciousness on the verge of taking over.

"It's just a dream, Ro, you're okay," I whisper, waiting for her to realize that she is in fact trapped in a nightmare and that at any moment she can leave that place.

Which she does after a few more minutes of drawing on her face with my finger. She eventually allows her eyes to flutter open, taking a moment to adjust to reality.

"Did I wake—" She gets caught in a yawn. "—you up?"

I shake my head. "No, I was on the way to the bathroom and heard you rolling around," I lie.

Grabbing the top portion of her comforter, she throws it over both of our heads. We're encased in the darkness beneath her blanket, and I'm transformed back to a time when we were little girls and refused to sleep in separate beds. When I wasn't jaded and the world was still full of possibilities. And it is, just not here, not in this town. At night when our parents were asleep, we'd crawl beneath the blankets and tell each other stories or dreams.

Below these blankets, I can take off the mask and be that little girl again. No looking over my shoulder to see who is watching, no insults to cut others down so I remain on top. I have nothing to fear right now.

"What was the nightmare about?"

"Same thing as always. Dark hallways, strange voices."

There are times I'm so envious of how gentle and open Rose is. There are other times that I hate myself for trying to pick that apart because I'm jealous.

Jealous that I'm the one bad things happened to.

Jealous that she still has the ability to care for others. To see the good in them.

While I'm soaking in a vat of black tar that won't seem to let me go.

"I'm sorry for being mean the other day and at the diner," I whisper, tucking my hands beneath my head as I look over at her. The light from her stars creeps through the spaces on her blanket, giving us minimal light.

Rose smiles, and my heart aches a bit at how generous and kind she is. How easily she forgives. It's my biggest concern with her and Silas. What if one of them hurt her? What if he hurts her? And she just keeps letting him because when Rosemary loves someone or something, she loves it so hard and it doesn't matter how they treat her.

Our parents are the perfect example.

"It's alright, Sage," she responds. "I know it's because you feel like you have to be mean to get out of this place without getting hurt. I just...I don't know why. You used to be so happy and free, then one day you just changed. Why won't you tell me what happened to you?"

"Can we not talk about me? I cannot express to you how badly I don't want to talk about myself right now."

"I miss talking about you. The old you. Ya know, the one that didn't care if she was prom queen or what the world thought of her? The one who carried around tattered scripts and pretended she was Meryl Streep receiving an Oscar. Do you remember her?"

I remember her, and one day, I'll be that girl again. The day I leave this place, I'll go back to my old self, and everything will be as it was. She just doesn't understand that if I'm here, in this toxic waste of a town, it will eat me alive.

I will be completely consumed by the soot, drowned in the black tar of misery that is seeping through the cracks here.

"She's dead, okay? Why can't you just let it fucking be, Rose," I snap with unnecessary anger that was never meant to be directed at her. It had always been towards the ones who turned me into this.

In these moments of hostility, I hate myself more for wishing it were her that went through what I did. That I was the one who lived without a care in the world. The one who hadn't been jaded.

And those thoughts keep me awake at night. Make me hate myself even more. Because I never, ever want my sister to go through what I did.

“Let’s talk about you, okay? How are you? Are you doing alright? Your piece looks like it’s finally coming together.”

When I say “coming together,” I mean “I have no idea what you are trying to create, but I support you either way.” Rosemary has a thing for sculptures made from broken glass, any kind, but half the time I have no idea what the hell they are supposed to be.

“I—” she starts. “I’m alright. The sculptures are fine. Silas and I are arguing a lot lately though.”

My eyebrows shoot up in alarm. “Why? What did he do?”

“Calm down. He didn’t do anything wrong.” She breathes out. “I swear you just look for reasons to hate him.”

“Well, he doesn’t make it hard to do.”

“We are fighting because I don’t want him to go to Hollow Heights. I want him to leave. All the boys are headed to the East Coast, and I want that for him. You know Mom and Dad will stroke out before I go to school anywhere else, but I don’t want him to stay here.”

They’re going to do more than stroke out when they find out I’m not going to that hellhole, even if they don’t give me money for college. I’ve come to terms that I will live in a box before I go there.

“Long-distance isn’t an option?” I offer, even though I want to say, “Tell him to kick fucking rocks.” I know she loves him, and I don’t want to see her hurt. Ever. Even when I’m the one doing the damage.

“He doesn’t want to do that when he knows we could just be together, but I’m afraid he’ll hate me when we are older. What if we break up? Then he stayed here for no reason.” Even in the dim lighting, I can see the tears slipping down her cheeks, and her voice is wet. “I love him, Sage. I love him so much it physically takes my breath away, and I can’t have him hate me.”

With ease, I reach over, wiping her tears with my thumb. “No tears for boys. We are too pretty for that.”

She laughs wistfully. “Not funny. I’m surprised you didn’t tell me to leave him.”

I bite my bottom lip. “Wellll,” I drawl out.

“Sage!” she scolds, laughing louder, “I know you find it hard to believe, but Silas makes me happy.”

I refrain from rolling my eyes. She’d been saying that since they met in middle school, always trying to convince me of how tame he was, how

sweet he could be. So much so that it was easy for her to overlook all the other hell they caused.

“It’s not about you being happy. It’s about you being safe.”

“You sure it’s not about my reputation?”

I click my tongue. “Your reputation is a part of being safe. What are you going to do when Silas says the wrong thing to someone? What are you going to do when that loud-ass Rook pushes someone too far?”

My mind sends me flashes of Rook’s face as he stared directly at Easton with a look so full of fury that for a second I was afraid he’d catch fire. His green eyes had become a forest fire, the tops of stunning pines torched by raging orange flames.

I’d never seen anything like it.

Rosemary grins. “I think he might like you.”

I recoil, not expecting that from her. “I was seconds away from breaking a nail off in his eye. I was going to waste a perfectly curated set of acrylics for a Hollow Boy. We were fighting, Ro. Or did you just not see that part?”

The blush that warms my face irritates me.

Rook Van Doren does not get to make me blush. Just like he doesn’t get to make me angry. He doesn’t get to see anything other than what I show him.

Rook Van Doren does *not* affect me.

“There isn’t a difference for him. Flirting, fighting. It’s all the same for RVD.”

I shouldn’t care, and I don’t.

This is just a chance to gather more secrets, to uncover more dirt on the boys that are a mystery to everyone. The perfect people to have leverage on.

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t just refer to him by his initials. So what does that even mean? This is not kindergarten where boys are mean to us if they like us.”

She rolls over to her back with a sigh. “He’s the one I know least about. I know his mom died, and his relationship with his father is awful. But what I can tell you, from what I’ve seen over all these years, is he enjoys lighting things on fire, and his emotions are all the same. Rook Van Doren does not give attention to things he deems boring. If he notices you, if you

interest him, you'll know it." She glances over at me. "And I'd say he noticed you."

"Yeah, well, he can point his attention elsewhere. I have no urge to come into contact with him *ever* again."

We fall into a pleasant silence, the comfort of being next to one another soothing not only her but me as well. Underneath this blanket, I think of what my life will be like years down the road, after I graduate this year.

Just one more school year, Sage. Keep it together for one more year. And it'll be your best performance yet.

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CHAPTER FIVE

a man's sow, he shall reap

rook

Homecoming.

Where the entire town comes out and watches high school students drive around downtown on excessive floats. Sports teams, homecoming attendants, local businesses, school clubs, anyone and anything involved with the school sits in these and waves as they pass.

I wonder if they know how stupid they look from the outside.

To each their own, but I can't find the fun in sitting on the side of the road to watch teenagers wave and smile. Just say you peaked in high school and stay home.

All it's doing is boosting the already colossal egos of my peers and their infatuations with their own image.

Music blasts through my headphones into my ears, the current song bouncing around violently in my head. My throttle hand tightens, pulling back a little more, spurring my bike forward with a sharp whine of the engine.

Wind pushes up my black hoodie, and the world outside is tinted light brown from the matte-black visor that is technically illegal to use on the road, but I doubt any police car would be able to chase me down on this thing.

Riding is a blank space. Even when I'm high, I'm still filled with thoughts and memories. But when I'm riding, everything is gone. I'm a complete white sheet with nothing scribbled on me.

It's the nearest thing to flying unaided that anyone will ever know.

The speedometer's hand ticks past eighty-five, climbing higher every second. There's a thrill in knowing if I tilt the wrong way by even an inch,

I'll become another piece of the pavement. Nothing but a road-burnt pancake.

That's the thing about fear. At the root, it's just the fear of dying, right? You're not scared of the actual experience, just the aftermath.

So fear doesn't work for me. We found out early in our lives that fear doesn't work on any of us. Not when you're already dead on the inside. When you're racing the Grim Reaper to the grave. When you could not care less if the world ever saw your existence ever again.

Adrenaline junkies on an intense scale.

For me, any chance to either hurt myself or put myself in a situation that would increase my epinephrine levels, I would do in a heartbeat. There is just something about that natural high that makes me feel electric. It makes me feel like my body is on fire, and I love that feeling.

My body leans with a curve, emerging through the soaring pine trees and heading into the town of Ponderosa Springs. It's a square of sorts, and right now everyone and their mother is on the east side of this shit swamp.

The parade lasts right until dusk, meaning we have another thirty minutes to do what we came here to do and leave before anyone else sees us.

Like ghosts, you could feel us in the air, but you'd never be able to prove it.

Or demons that hide inside your closet, only coming out when we want you to see us.

I drive through the empty street towards the town hall. Confetti, balloons, and candy cover the asphalt, a clear sign that this side has already been passed through.

My bike skids to a halt when I pull in front of the building. What used to be a Catholic church had been turned into the town hall. It had been here since the founding of the town, upgraded to stand the test of time. It's where my father worked fifty percent of the time.

I hit the kill switch, my toe kicking the stand, and I slowly ease my way off my bike. Removing my helmet and setting it on the seat, I pull out a cigarette and sit on the concrete steps below the fountain in front of the building.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I see a message from Silas.

Passing the pharmacy now.

That was three minutes ago, so we have roughly twenty minutes before the entire town makes their way back to where I'm currently sitting. The parade always starts and ends in the same spot every year.

Halfway finished with my dart, I see the lights of a brand-new Range Rover coming towards me. My leg begins to bounce, and my fingers hum with anticipation.

Welcome to the gates of hell. The show is about to begin.

"I hate homecoming," Alistair says, hopping out of the front seat of a car that does not belong to him. The control freak inside of him wouldn't let me and Silas handle this on our own.

Plus, we have a mob mentality. You hurt one. You hurt us all.

I scoff at the cheesy white words written on the windows, things like, "QB1" "State!" "#7 Sinclair"

Never understood the obsession people have with high school sports.

"What don't you hate?" Thatcher replies, sliding out of the passenger seat. I've known him a long time, and I know he's petty, makes jokes, plays piano, and enjoys pissing people off.

Yet there are pieces of Thatcher I've never understood. Parts of him that are darker than my own. It's when he gets quiet that the world needs to fear him.

The day he finally gives into his heritage is the day the world will pay for what they made him into.

Even I get goosebumps thinking about it.

"Hitting people." Alistair smirks, bumping shoulders with Thatch as they make their way in my direction. The two of them had been tasked with jacking Easton's car and meeting me here, while Silas is keeping an eye on the traffic.

"False," I start, tossing my cigarette to the ground. "You hate the town's homecoming. Ours is always fun."

"You got cigarettes?"

I reach into my pocket, tossing the pack at Alistair, his leather jacket shifting as he catches them. My part of this begins now as I open my black book bag, the inside filled with everything you need to be thrown in prison for an arson charge, and pull out two empty bottles of whiskey, ones that I'd taken from the trash can in my own home.

"Lighter?"

I raise my eyes to my dark-headed friend, Alistair.

“You want me to smoke it for you too?” I joke, tossing him my Zippo. “Don’t fucking steal that one. It’s my favorite.”

He inspects the front of the lighter, arching an eyebrow, and lights his smoke before throwing it back to me. “Your favorite Zippo out of that entire massive collection is the one with your initials on it? A little fond of yourself, aren’t you?”

I roll my eyes as I squirt isopropyl alcohol into the inside of the whiskey bottles. “Says the one who likes leaving imprints of his own initials on people’s faces.”

We share a laugh while I work my pyromaniac magic, soaking a few rags in the alcohol before shoving them into the tops of the bottles, leaving a few inches hanging out of them.

“Look at him, our little chemistry nerd.” Thatcher rubs my hair, and I refrain from smacking the shit out of him.

“This has absolutely jack shit to do with chemistry. You can literally Google this. Four-year-olds could do it.”

“Well, let’s speed this process up. They’re headed back, and I want to get a good spot to watch Easton’s face when he shows up.”

I nod, heeding his warning and working quickly. Taking both bottles, I pull out my matches, striking one and watching the orange burst from the stick. My blood boils as I touch the flame to the rags hanging from the neck of the bottles. As I light them, I hope every time Sinclair sees his car he’ll think back to the words he spat at that diner.

He’ll think twice about pushing me too far next time. He’ll watch his mouth when it comes to Rose, when it comes to my friends.

This is a warning.

I’m consuming his car now, but the next time, it will be him I watch burn.

With agile movements, I rear back and chuck one bottle at a time through the Range Rover’s windows. One lands in the back seat and the other in the front. It won’t be long before the real action begins.

Two loud cracks like a whip against wet skin spark into the air as the glass bottles explode inside the car, swarming the vehicle in an inferno of retribution.

“Let the show begin, boys.”

My mouth begins to water as I move my bike up the hill past the town hall, a small knoll where we won't be seen but has the perfect view of the disarray we are about to cause.

My foot bounces as I reach into my pocket, grabbing another cigarette to smoke while we watch. I watch as the entire town rolls in front of their star quarterback's torched car.

The entire vehicle is completely up in smoke, covered from back to front.

Goosebumps race down my spine as I watch the flames dance, swirl, and spin with fascination, seeing every single sin I've ever committed inside of them. The embers floating off into the open air remind me of the tiny pieces that are left of my soul.

There were times when I was young, I would hear fire trucks pass my house, and I'd desperately try to chase them, running behind their sirens so I could see what it was they were racing to put out.

I'd only successfully made it to three, but every time, I was jealous that I wasn't the creator of that blaze. It was beyond my control sometimes.

A sickness.

One that rushed through my veins and spun around every cord of my DNA. It infected me all over. A sickness that I refused to cure.

My heart pounds in my chest, my palms sweaty as I grin from our spot on the hill, looking down at their horrified faces. Easton is losing his fucking mind as people desperately attempt to dull the fire.

It's total mayhem.

Parents gathering their children.

Students yelling.

The football team using their letterman jackets to swat at the sea of flames.

And then there is her.

Pretty poison in her tight cheerleading uniform that wraps around her like a second skin. A long-sleeve top that squeezes her perky breasts and leaves her diamond belly ring glinting in what's left of the sunset. The forest green of her outfit is the complete opposite of her curled, red hair, only making her stand out more.

I sink my teeth into my bottom lip, dying to know what's underneath that skirt.

By nature, she is seamlessly made.

Designed for deception.

You are taught to steer clear of beautiful things in the wild. Exquisitely colored frogs with neon patterns, stunning jellyfish that glow with their bioluminescence, exotic caterpillars that seem friendly enough to pet—they are all designed to bring attention and ward off danger.

Other creatures know to steer clear of the pretty things of the world. Humans feel the need to ignore those warnings, feel the need to touch even when we shouldn't.

Leave the beautiful things alone, they tell you.

They speak the same things about fire.

And, well, we see how well I listened to those tales of caution.

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CHAPTER SIX

up close and personal

sage

“Fucking mentally deranged rejects!”

My boyfriend of choice yells as he kicks the tire of his burnt Range Rover. I hated that car to begin with, so this almost seems like an improvement.

Our homecoming parade has officially gone up in smoke.

Pun intended.

Madness and confusion sweep over the rambunctious crowd that has gathered to watch their high school students celebrate before our rival football game tomorrow. Children scream for their parents, students speed away as quickly as possible.

Sure, it’s just a car on fire, but everyone knows who’s responsible, and no one, not a single soul, wants to wait around to see if they have more in store.

My friends, or lack thereof, had abandoned me as soon as danger was detected, and considering I had ridden with the target of their rage, I’m going to need to find a ride home.

Even as people dart past me and spectators whisper, I’m caught in a momentary daze watching the orange blaze overtake the vehicle, knowing deep in my stomach every cruel intention that was meant when they set that fire.

This is a warning.

A message.

One that should not be taken lightly.

“Watch your language in public, son.”

Stephen Sinclair’s voice means business as always. It has to, being the dean of a world-renowned university known for breeding some of the

world's most successful adults. There isn't much he misses or lets his son get away with.

Dating Easton did leaps and bounds for my reputation, but the same energy isn't reciprocated when it comes to anything outside the public image.

He cowers in situations where he should stand his ground. Always fading into the blur of normalcy. Nothing he ever did excited me.

Ignited me.

Yes, he's blinding to look at, but he never made my heart skip or butterflies flutter between my thighs. Which means breaking up with him after graduation will be a breeze.

Until then, I'll continue letting him tote me around like a Pomeranian shoved inside a Prada bag.

"Dad, but my fu—" Easton starts but stops his sentence when Stephen's eyes laser through him. A glare that says *if you say another curse word, you'll regret it*.

People linger, watching from a safe distance but close enough to hear any form of drama they could scoop up. His father knows that; he's always aware of prying eyes and open ears.

"My car is totaled, and don't act like you don't know who did it! I'm not letting his father get him out of this one." He seethes. The nice boy who wears ties on game days is gone.

There is a moment of silence, one that hangs like a pendulum in the air, swaying back and forth, getting closer to Easton's throat.

With practiced form, Stephen holds his phone to his ear with a tight smile, while the other hand dusts his son's letterman jacket off before resting his fingers there.

"You let me worry about the car and who is responsible. And don't you dare think of retaliating, do you understand?" he warns with a severe tone, squeezing Easton's shoulder with a deeper grip.

Then like a switch, his smile is genuine as he turns to the rest of the remaining crowd.

"Plus, we have a football game to win tomorrow night, isn't that right?" he booms.

The people clap and cheer, the fire completely out and forgotten about. This place is very good at covering up shit with fake happiness.

My boyfriend is overtaken by his football team, all of them scooping him up onto their shoulders like some sacrificial lamb, boosting his ego and rekindling his already huge God complex.

The sun has almost completely set, and my uniform is starting to itch. There's a pint of Cherry Garcia ice cream and a rerun of *Sixteen Candles* calling my name.

I pull my phone out of my purse, knowing Rose won't drive here, and my mother is getting a spa treatment, so that leaves my dad.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Easton approaches me with a grin, still laughing at his friends as they shove him in my direction.

"Well, considering your car looks like my mother's attempts at cooking, I'm going to need a ride. I'm texted my dad to pick me up." I wiggle my phone at him, smiling for a short minute.

"Mind cutting the attitude?" he says. "I thought girlfriends were supposed to comfort their boyfriends after tragic events, not act like spoiled brats. I thought you told me you were coming to the party?"

"Your Range Rover got set on fire, it's not like your dog died," I return with a snippy tone. If he wants an attitude, that's what I'll give him. "No, Easton, I told you I wasn't going. I have homework, and I'm exhausted."

"Babe, come on," he whines as he grabs my waist and pulls me into his body. "It'll be fun. It's our last homecoming party before college and you're gonna bail?" He drags his nose up and down the side of my neck.

"They're fun for you," I point out, laying my hand on his chest and pushing him back a bit. "I always end up making sure you get to the bathroom before you puke and driving you home. I'm just not interested tonight. I'll text you later?"

His grip tightens around me like a python ready to eat its prey, his blue eyes turning a few shades too dark.

This is the truth of this place.

Everyone wears masks. Some are just more visible than others.

I hate this about him more than anything. It's the hardest to put up with.

It isn't that the sex lasts three minutes or how he always talks about himself. It's when his father snaps at him, he becomes the worst version of himself. The man his father made him into.

As far as I know, Stephen never hits him, but he's able to control him with the simplest of words. He makes his son feel weak and inferior to him.

So, because Easton refuses to stand up to his dad, he takes it out on the people around him when he doesn't get what he wants—and it's me who bears the brunt of it most of the time.

"Not interested?" he repeats, lowering his voice so others can't hear. "Let me make something clear to you, Sage. I'm the quarterback of the football team, the future of Ponderosa Springs. I am the star of everyone's eye in this town, and in a split second, I could demolish that cupcake reputation you cling to so tightly. If I want my girlfriend to be seen with me at a party, then she's going to go."

My molars grind together as he keeps running his mouth.

"So why don't you do what you do best—hang off my arm, smile, and look pretty, alright?"

Those words trigger something deep inside me—events I locked up far, far, away—bringing them to the surface.

Sit still, smile, and look pretty, Sage, I hear in the back of my mind, whispering along my collarbone and wiggling beneath my skin like worms. I'm infested with haunted moments, thousands of little camera flashes inside my head to depict all those miserable days and nights.

I look around at the eyes, the observers, knowing I can't do anything excessive. If I did, I have no doubt in two hours everyone would know, and it would be blown into something dramatic.

Breaking News!

All-star Easton Sinclair and Miss Ponderosa Springs have Called it Quits!

So in order to prevent any more fire damage today, I do what I do best.

I act.

A smile, sweet like honey, unfolds across my face. I lean my body closer into his, his chemically made scent wafting over me, and with gentle fingers, I run my hand up his chest, resting it there.

My breath is hot on his neck as I hover my lips close to his ear, using my tennis shoes to help me up onto my tippy-toes.

It's a warm embrace, one that looks full of young love and butterflies. I'm nearly positive I hear a couple walk by muttering about how precious we

are together.

“If you don’t take your hands off me in the next three seconds, Easton Sinclair, I will show you what ruining someone’s life *really* looks like. Do not underestimate the damage I can do with this pretty smile.”

Contrasting our outer appearance to a vicious extreme, my voice is deadly.

Cold.

Ruthless.

Lacking any emotion aside from resentment.

My smile grows wider as his arms retract, falling at his sides as he heeds my warning.

Which I think is the smartest thing he’s done this entire evening.

“Sage, I’m sorry,” he breathes, not because he means it, but because he knows I’m not bluffing. Not even a little.

Moving my face towards him, I peck his cheek quickly, chaste and straight to the point. The period at the end of this conversation.

Although my father has yet to reply to my text, I still back away. “Text you later, babe!”

I need out of here. Away from him. Away from the presumptions.

Despite the fact my house is several miles from Main Street, I look forward to the walk.

The fresh air, the quiet, the solitude.

Weaving my way through town, I wave to those who make eye contact and look at what’s left of the celebration, the fallen decorations and trash that will be gone by morning.

In times like these, if you catch Main Street at the right time, it almost feels like an abandoned location after an apocalyptic war.

Empty. Secluded. Forgotten.

Decades ago, this town stopped being a home, becoming less and less, until it turned into what it is now.

A ghost.

Lonely and heartbroken.

A ghost of everything that could have been and what never was.

The worst part is, it doesn’t haunt us like most people would argue.

It does not hide in the dark beneath your bed or draw messages on your foggy mirror.

It's present, it's alive, because we refuse to let go of it. Move on from it. Forget it.

My ears ring as they're flocked with the sound of a lawnmower, or what sounds like a one.

The buzzing grows louder and louder before my curiosity makes me turn just in time to watch the gray motorcycle whiz past me, the rider turning his head from the road with reckless abandon to look over at me as I stand on the shoulder.

His matte helmet prevents me from seeing his eyes, but I know whose face lies beneath.

I refrain from flipping him the bird just in time for his brake lights to glow deep red.

I've never truly conformed to any one organized religion, although I attend Sunday mass each week, but in this very second, I would have been willing to convert to just about anything if it meant Rook Van Doren would keep driving.

Unfortunately, whatever god or gods are among us didn't do an express lane to mercy or grace.

"Heard about your boyfriend's car," he says arrogantly as he removes the helmet from his head, pieces of straight brown hair falling down in front of his face, "A shame, really. No one should mess with a man's ride."

The grin that appears on his face makes me ill with irrational anger. Annoyance, like a fly that keeps hovering over your nicely planned picnic.

I try not to look at the way his thighs flex as he straddles the bike, how big and strong they look gripping the machine. It's a flaw in me for giving in to the temptation, but I am only human, and it's hard considering even when he's wearing that thick hoodie, you can tell he is built beneath.

"Heard about it?" I cross my arms in front of my chest, "Oh, please, give me a break."

If he thinks he's going to front like he wasn't behind it, he has another think coming. I am the sovereign of seeing past people's bullshit.

"He must have pissed someone off, it would seem. Not hard to fathom when you think about it—he has a pretty big mouth on him. Probably ran it to the wrong person this time."

"Cut the shit, Van Doren. We both know it was you and your looney bin-bound friends. No need to lie about it."

His match moves across his lips, shifting with his smirk. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about. I didn’t even know the homecoming parade was today.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, tossing my thick curls over my shoulder as I walk closer to his stationary form.

“Does it get you off? Is that why you all do it?” I prod, wanting to see just how far I can tip the scales of his temper. See just what it takes to enter the bad side of one of the infamous Hollow Boys.

“I read somewhere that causing harm is the only way psychopaths can get off. Do you all go back to your spooky mansions and jerk each other off thinking about all the schizoid shit you do?”

There is a twitch.

It’s slight, and I barely catch it, but his hand jerks just a bit while I talk. It’s in his square jaw too, right near his cheekbone—it tightens before he releases it, meaning I’ve scored a hole in one.

I go from a girl he doesn’t like to a girl he *really* doesn’t like.

My eyes follow his tongue as it rolls in front of his teeth, his leg swinging over the bike so he’s standing up at his full height.

“Careful, princess.” He lifts his helmet upwards, pointing in my direction and putting it down before he walks closer. “Your friends and boyfriend are not around to defend you. You are all alone, after dark, near the woods. Not an ideal place to be for someone like you.”

The way his hooded eyes dial in on me, watching my every movement, the dirt cracking beneath his shoes—if I tried to run, he’d catch me before I even turned around.

And I’m not a runner.

Not from him. Not from anyone.

“I don’t need anyone to protect me. I can handle you myself.”

“Yeah?” He kicks his head to the right condescendingly. “You think a good little girl like you can handle me?” His eyes drop down the levels of my body with every word. “I suspect you’ve never even harmed a fly, never snuck out or done something that wasn’t laid out for you already. How do you expect to fend off someone as out of their mind as me?”

I swallow visibly when he stops walking. Another step and our knees would knock together. I refuse to back down even when he lifts his hand,

one finger. The rough feeling of his skin on me as he drags the tip along my jawline makes me jerk from him. “Don’t touch me.”

I’m not surprised when he doesn’t listen, continuing to talk over me. “I mean, you’re the professional, correct? You read about it, about me?” he taunts me, his words cutting me down, trying to bury me, but his touch feels like hot coals. “Tell me, what do they say about sadistic pyromaniacs with bad tempers that people call the devil? Did your books tell you what I’ll do to you, what I like?”

His finger draws a path from my jaw down the column of my neck, the pads of his hand tracing the veins and muscles that make up my throat. It stops just above my collarbone, his thumb brushing against my pulse. I can smell him, mixtures of all things explosive, and it’s burning me from the inside out.

This is the closest I’ve ever been to one of them.

There is a reason you’re warned to keep your distance.

Because once you’re in their reach, you are no longer in control of anything anymore.

Mind, body, soul.

They own you.

“Are you threatening me right now?” I’m proud of how steady my voice sounds, considering my breath is coming out in shaky exhales, my tongue touching my upper lip as I keep making direct eye contact. That usually intimidates people enough to get them to back off, but not him. He matches my energy, refusing to let it go.

Removing the match from his mouth, he taps my bottom lip with the red tip before sparking the flame between his thumb and pointer finger. It burns high, flashing directly in front of me, so close I can feel the heat from it.

His face flickers in the dark, wearing the orange glow proudly.

“Nah.” It’s at that moment I comprehend the severity of this situation, of what is happening, that Rook’s hand hardens on my throat, fingers twining around me like vines around the base of a tree.

And it’s not a kinky hold where you press the sides of the neck to induce pleasure. No, it’s painful, tightening around my windpipe. His hand has a goal, and it’s not to get me hot—it’s to kill.

If any other man in the world was touching me like this, I'd already be ready to kill them. However, his hold feels different than anything I've experienced before. Something about this feeling, like he's melting away any trace of anyone before him,

creates an entirely new feeling inside of me as he holds me here.

He leans the match towards my face, hellfire eyes glowing with hostility. "But if you keep mouthing about things you don't know jack shit about, I will be."

My mouth goes dry as I try to jerk my face away from his grip only for him to squeeze tighter. My air supply grows thinner and thinner as the seconds tick by.

He isn't going to actually burn me, is he?

"And I can promise you, princess, there is no handling me without getting burned."

A grin spreads on his face as he releases me, stepping back. With no fear, he sticks his tongue out, pressing the still-burning stick into it. The sizzling sound cuts through my haze.

I'm traumatized and amazed at how he doesn't even flinch. Like it's an everyday occasion for him to put out a match with his mouth.

It's then I notice the car headed towards us, the one he must have heard that prevented him from continuing what had previously been assault on its way to homicide.

"You know where to find me when you realize just how bored you are in your glass house, Sage," he says with a laugh in his tone, mounting his bike once again.

"Fuck you, prick," I manage to croak out over the roar of his bike starting up.

There isn't another word muttered after, only his back to me as he pulls back onto the road, darting off into the dark, and I have to ask myself if I'd hallucinated what just happened.

Raising my own fingers to my throat, I press into the places he'd just touched, still feeling his presence on my skin.

Had I been scared? Maybe.

But it was more than fear.

It felt like freedom.

The space between who I am expected to be and who I want to be, and he had shoved me into that place. Somewhere I didn't know what would come next, something I couldn't control, somewhere I could be liberated from carrying the weight of what people thought of me.

An escape of the mind.

My body tingles from the tip of my head to the soles of my feet.

I feel him everywhere.

And just like fire, he lingers far after he is out of sight.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

garden of eden

rook

It's an entire month before my path crosses with Sage Donahue again.

The seed of curiosity had been planted in her brain, and I knew when the right time came, she was going to crack and come running to find the excitement her life lacked.

Underneath that exterior, I know there's a girl dying to escape. I could see it in the way she treated Rose, in the way she turned green with envy. She wants the freedom her sister has but for some reason is too afraid to chase after it.

I'm walking to class, my lip throbbing from the new cut it had received before I even touched my oatmeal, when I hear a voice bounce off the lockers.

The halls are empty, students already at their desks for class, leaving me alone with the voice.

Normally, I would continue walking, go to class, and get the staring over with. Continue my day as if it had never happened.

But something about the soft yet firm tone has my ears peaking with familiarity.

I follow it all the way to the end of the hall. My hand presses into the door of the auditorium carefully. These old fuckers creak when you breathe on them.

Several rows of empty red cloth seats fill the theatre. All the lights that normally light the stage are off except for one single beam.

It glares from the balcony onto the dark wooden stage, allowing nothing but what hits the light to be seen in any direction.

There is only her.

She stands alone, just her and the light, wearing this plaid school skirt number that makes her legs look like they travel for miles.

Quietly, I slide into one of the seats in the back, leaning back and plucking my freshly rolled blunt from behind my ear. I use my match to light it, making sure my movements don't disturb this little actress.

"Gah, I'd almost forgot how strong you are, John Proctor!" she says confidently, her eyes wide and sorta dreamy, like a woman with an infatuation.

Calling her a good actress would be an understatement, because I thought it was impossible for Sage Donahue to look this smitten.

She pauses for her imaginary co-star to say his line before her body shifts and she continues.

"Oh, she's only gone silly somehow," she giggles—literally fucking giggles.

Smoke rolls off my lips as I watch her move across the stage. Gilding, like she was a swan born on water.

Graceful, comfortable, belonging.

It almost makes me forget what she said the last time we talked or how close I was to showing her what it's really like to piss me off.

"Oh, posh." She waves her hand, stepping closer to the man I'm assuming she's talking to. The wickedness in her body language makes me smirk. "We were dancin' in the woods last night, and my uncle leaped in on us. She took fright, is all."

She mumbles the next few lines, both hers and her partner's, pacing back and forth in the spotlight like something is building inside of her.

I'm not one to be interested in things that don't excite me, but something about how real she looks up there is fucking with me.

"She is blackening my name in the village!" She says the words as if she'd swore. "She is telling lies about me! She is a cold, sniveling woman, and you—" Her eyebrows furrow, sadness creeping up her throat. "You bend to her!"

I hate theatre, and I think I've been inside of this one maybe twice, but there wouldn't be much that would move me from this seat.

She shakes her head aggressively, like her partner had said something she couldn't stand to hear. I lean forward in my seat, squinting as I catch the tears that glisten off her pale face.

“I look for John Proctor who took me from my sleep and put knowledge in my heart! I never knew what pretense Salem was, I never knew the lying lessons I was taught by all these Christian women and their covenanted men!” she spits, her voice sizzling with emotion, like a betrayed woman in pain.

“You loved me, John Proctor.” She steps closer to the front of the stage, eyes begging without even saying the words. “And whatever sin it is you love me yet!”

I inhale, the smoke trying to make me cough, but I hold it in, resting the blunt on my lips as I raise my hands.

“Bravo!” I shout, clapping my hands slowly, echoing in the room that is otherwise filled with silence. “What a performance.”

She freezes, busted in the act of being something other than queen bee by the one person she can’t boss around.

I push myself out of the seat, making my way down the aisle towards the front of the stage with heavy footsteps.

“What was that?” I plant my hands flat on the stage, vaulting myself up so that I’m standing in the shadows while she continues to gawk at me from the spotlight. *“Romeo and Juliet?”*

It takes her a moment to realize what is going on. The vulnerable girl who seemed to be enjoying herself on this stage retreats, and out comes her protector. We all become something scary in order to protect our true selves and the ones we love.

I see her mask. And I’m tired of her keeping it on when she’s around me.

I want to see the ugly pain beneath. The secret scars she covers, the monsters eating at her flesh. Those are real, and life is too short to focus on the fake.

“What are you doing here, Rook?” she says, folding the pages of the book in her hand until they are closed, waving it around to sweep the smoke away from her. “You can’t smoke in here! It’s a freaking fire hazard.”

“Let’s be honest, Sage. I’m a fire hazard,” I joke, but it doesn’t land the way I want.

Tough crowd.

“Let’s pretend you didn’t see me here,” she mutters, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear and moving to leave.

“Ah, ah, ah,” I start. “Not so fast. What were you doing?” My body blocks hers from the steps, keeping her from leaving.

“Performing open-heart surgery,” she deadpans. “What does it look like, idiot.”

I click my tongue, taking in another deep inhale of the weed before putting the cherry out on my jeans. “I wouldn’t have taken you for a theatre geek.”

“Do not call me that,” she hisses, pointing her dark red nails at me. “If you tell anyone what you saw, you will regret it, pyro.”

Testosterone fills me up. The challenge she is presenting is almost too much to handle. Is she threatening me? Thinking she can do to me what she does to everyone else? Cut me down with menacing words?

Apparently, she has not learned who she’s working with here.

“Yeah? What are you gonna do about it, TG?”

TG. I like it. Theatre Geek. It feels like a little secret on top of a secret that I could dangle above her head.

She pauses, trying to think of what she could possibly say that would scare someone like me into silence. I enjoy watching her scramble for something, anything to use against me in this situation.

“That’s the problem. You have nothing on me. You have no rumors, no secrets, nothing to spill about me. And that’s your only power in this place. Without that, you have absolutely nothing.”

All of which is true.

How do you scare the guy with no fear?

I’ve taken away her only bargaining chip. This is how she keeps people at arm’s length, because she has the power over them. No one knows anything about Sage except what she wants you to.

Now, she’s caught in my web.

“Rook, listen—”

“Oh, it’s Rook now? What happened to pyro?”

Frustration rattles her, but beneath that is fear.

Her anxiety-riddled, flushed skin makes her cinnamon-colored freckles even darker. I had held a hot match to her neck last month. With her fragile neck in my grip, I could’ve killed her, but she didn’t so much as blink. It wasn’t fear that day, it was excitement.

They are two different emotions, and you can feel the difference. It's in the way her heart fluttered against my palm and her eyes stayed wide.

I know fear, and I know exhalation.

But right now, she's afraid, scared I'll tell people about her in the theatre. Something that up till now I wasn't aware was private.

"Stop being a jackass. You think I like asking you favors?" she snaps, pressing her fingers into her eyes before sighing. "Just," she breathes, "just please don't tell anyone, okay? It's not something that everyone knows."

I pause, tilting my head, waiting to see if I should push her any further or let her have this one.

Her eyes do that thing they did on stage earlier, where they soften and the blue color isn't so harsh, but they still burn bright like gas flames. The trick is figuring out if this is all a show or if she's being honest.

Either way, I'm not leaving until I get some form of leverage over her.

"I'll keep my mouth closed, under one condition." I offer, stepping closer to her. The smell of her perfume mixing with my marijuana creates this sort of fever dream aroma that makes my high feel more intense.

She touches her tongue to her upper lip. "What is it?"

I bend down to her height, my face level with hers, our eyes creating one direct line. "Tell me the truth. Why do you care?"

"About what?" She's stalling, trying to avoid the question.

"Don't play dumb, Sage. It's not a good look on a girl like you. Why do you care if people find out about your hobby? It's not something that would be frowned on or taint your image, so why do you care?"

My eyes flick to her body, seeing her fists clenched so tightly that her hands are ghostly. Even so, she stands her ground, keeping her eyes on mine. Like she's so confident that I won't see through her, into her.

"Because when you give the people here genuine pieces of who you are, they blend them up and drink it down with their morning breakfast. They will stomp out every hope you've ever had. When Ponderosa Springs learns your secrets, it holds you captive forever. There is no getting out, and I am not letting that happen."

I'd be lying if I said her answer didn't shock me.

It makes me wonder if Sage has already seen the wicked ways of this town up close and personal, if the sweetheart everyone knows is harboring

something disastrous and twisty within the walls of her mind.

“What happened to you?” I ask accidentally, meaning to say it in my head.

“Enough to know better.”

A bell rings abruptly, the sound of students filling the halls, and all authenticity disappears. She picks her bag up off the stage, moving past me and down the steps.

It makes sense now, how she starred me down when I threatened her on the side of the road. How she was so unafraid.

There are only two people who can look the pits of hell in the eyes and not flinch.

Those in Hell and those who already made their way out.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

when the levee breaks

sage

I knew something was wrong the moment I walked into the Sinclair household. Actually, I think I figured it out when my parents told me we were going to dinner there.

We've been invited to holiday parties every year, birthday events, even hosted one of my father's campaign brunches in their backyard.

But never just dinner.

Easton sits to my direct left, his father at the head of the table. His mother sits across from her son and my parents beside her. There's nothing but the quiet clutter of silverware hitting plates as they all eat in what's a peaceful silence for them.

I feel Easton's hand glide to my thigh, resting there, giving me a gentle squeeze as he sits back in the wooden chair.

"So, Sage, you've received another homecoming nomination this year? What is that, four years running now?" Stephen asks me directly, my spine stiffening as he uses my name. Every time he speaks, it's with a tone of discipline, even when he's being chatty.

I nod politely. "Yes, sir. All four years of high school."

"She's being modest, Dad. It's already a win for her. Sage has won homecoming court every year. As if they'd pick anyone else." Easton bumps my shoulder with his own.

"Some people enjoy being humble, son. Not everyone needs to flaunt their accomplishments. You could learn a thing or two from her," he taunts, lifting his wineglass and sipping the dark red liquid.

It's a crash course in how to patronize someone. Easton's father is a professional at it, so good that everyone around laughs at what they think is a good joke.

Although I'm not fond of my boyfriend all the time, I also know what it's like to be a prisoner in your own home. To be talked down to by the people who are supposed to care the most.

I reach over, fixing a piece of stray blond hair lovingly. "I beg to differ, Mr. Sinclair. Your son has taught me more than you'd ever know over the years. I wouldn't be who I am without him."

All of which is true—he did help show me what I could be and what I couldn't be. Easton showed me how to have power; it's his own fault that I took it all for myself.

"That's sweet of you, honey. Makes me proud of my little boy," says Lena.

Lena Sinclair, his mother, is a stunning woman. Age has gifted her with more and more beauty as the days go by. The short blonde pixie cut makes me jealous of her bone structure, all angles and dimensions while mine sits neutrally round, and my forehead always looks longer even after I'd learned what contouring was.

I'm not the only person that noticed Lena's beauty either.

Easton's greatest family shame is that Wayne Caldwell enjoyed helping himself to Lena's beauty every Saturday at the country club for an entire two years before anyone even noticed.

He would kill me if I ever muttered a word about it, because if Alistair Caldwell found out, he would take Easton to the grave with disgrace. The town would smile in their faces, but they would be part of the rumor mill for years.

I only know because Easton had gotten drunk after a party our freshman year. He spilled it when he was cussing about the Hollow Boys and their ratty prominence.

It's one of my biggest secrets inside my jar of blackmail, and he knows if he takes a step too far with me, I'll tell everyone.

"Not a little boy, Mom."

"I know, sweetie. I just—"

"Speaking of being a man, I think it's about that time, Easton, don't you think?"

I knew something was wrong when we walked into this house.

But it would seem that was because I was the only one who hadn't been told what was about to happen.

“Time for what?” I ask softly, taking a drink of my water, looking around at all the eyes that are on me.

There is an uncomfortable stillness that makes me shift in my chair. I set my glass down. “Is there something I’m missing or...?” I laugh to try to lighten the mode that has settled in the room from their blatant stares.

You know when you don’t want to turn around because you know the slasher in the horror movie is standing there, so you try to avoid it?

That’s what I do as I hear the chair next to me squeak. I hold my gaze with my father, who is trying to look everywhere but at me.

“Sage?” Easton clears his throat, attempting to grab my attention.

My mom’s eyes are lit up, dimming the longer I refuse to turn to face him. My ears fill with fluid, rushing with thunderous movements. I can taste the water in my lungs growing higher, the urge to cough heavy, the need to breathe without my chest feeling like it’s being compressed by a semi-truck.

I spin, painfully slow, a broken clock on its last rotation, to find the boyfriend I’m only dating for status down on one knee holding an ungodly large diamond that is going to send me into an epileptic fit.

Waves and waves of water submerge me.

Dark, cloudy water that eats me up, pulling me further from the light.

I’m drowning in front of all these people, and not a single one cares enough to pull me up for air.

“Sage?” he says again. “Did you hear what I said?”

I’m not sure what is worse—the silence or how confident he looks. There isn’t a drop of sweat on his forehead, and he isn’t shaking. It’s like he knows I won’t say no.

“Are you proposing to me right now?” I say with what oxygen I have left inside of me.

“Well, I have the ring, and I’m on one knee, so...” He grins, nodding his head.

I had been flawless all night. Kept my composure, done what needed to be done to get through this dinner, but this? This is too much, even for me.

“We’re eighteen, East. We haven’t even graduated high school yet. I don’t think this is the—” I grind my teeth, a nervous chuckle escaping me. “—right time for this.”

“Babe, come on.” He waves off all my warning signs. “We’ve been together since middle school. This is no big thing.”

It’s then he grabs for my hand, pulling it closer to his chest to slide the ring onto my finger, but I jerk it back from him as if he’d tried to burn me.

“Mom, Dad, I can’t.” I look to my parents, watching their faces, seeing the truth in front of my eyes in big, bold, flashing neon lights.

“You knew this was going to happen today, didn’t you?” I direct towards them, averting my stare to Easton’s parents. His mother looks nervous, and his father seems annoyed by my lack of excitement.

“I can’t do this right now. I can’t do this. I’m sorry.” My palms dig into the dining table as I push myself back, and vomit sits in my throat.

I almost fall when I stand up, my legs shaking beneath me, but I’m not staying here. I’m *not* staying here.

This can’t be happening right now. Had I played this part so well that I landed myself in this position? There’s an entire year of school left—this isn’t supposed to happen this early.

I would have been able to say no without a problem at graduation, but I can’t right now. Why would I? Everyone thinks we are obsessed with each other—shouldn’t I be happy?

My heels drown out the noise of chairs moving and raised voices, all except Stephen’s, who puts the bullet in my coffin.

“You better figure this out, Frank. We had a deal. Let’s not forget, you need this more than I do.”

My hands pull at the front door, and I’m thankful I drove myself here this evening. The fresh air almost feels worse. I’m desperate to resurface from this, but it seems everyone is intent on holding me beneath the water.

“Sage, stop.” My father’s voice makes me do just that, like he’s grabbing the back of my neck and holding me there to die.

I spin, the gravel of the driveway crunching beneath me. “You blindsided me with this!” I accuse. “Mom, I wouldn’t have been shocked, but you? You’ve always been honest with me.”

My relationship with my dad isn’t one to write home about. We talk about his work and school. We aren’t the picture of a father-daughter relationship, but like I said, he never lied to me.

Not once.

He’s always been brutally honest about everything.

“We’re broke,” he says, running a hand through his gray hair before dragging it down his face in frustration. “*Broke*. We have nothing.”

I furrow my eyebrows. “And that has something to do with my engagement at the ripe age of eighteen?”

“We have no money, Sage!” he shouts before realizing there are still people inside who could be listening and takes it down a notch. “Nothing left. The only reason we’re able to pay our mortgage is because of Stephen. He has been financing me for years as mayor. But now? This is money we are using to survive. He agreed to continue the funding as long as your and Easton’s relationship ended in a marriage.”

“What? Why? That doesn’t even make sense. Easton wouldn’t be short on relationships if I said no.”

“Stephen knows what Easton needs, and that’s you. He wants him to be with someone...” He draws it out, trying to find the words.

“Someone he thinks he can control,” I finish, shaking my head in disbelief.

“No, it’s not—”

“How long ago did you make this deal?” I interrupt.

I was the one who drew the short end of this stick. Every single person inside that house knew about this and left me out in the fucking dead of winter, butt naked.

They had done this behind my back, taking my control away from me.

When he doesn’t answer, I say it louder. “How long!”

“Four—four years ago. Your mother and I thought it was God’s will that you two ended up dating, that this would be no issue, Sage! You’re young and in love—what’s wrong with being engaged, with getting married when you’re in love?”

I stare at his eyes, at the same blue that swirled around my own irises, and can’t believe I was created from someone like this. That those two people had been what made me. That even I, as young as I am, know I would never do this to my own children.

That this, no matter how they spin it or dress it up, is another wrongdoing they have done to me.

“What’s wrong with you!” I shout. “I deserve a choice! What if Easton hit me? What if I don’t want to be married? If I don’t love him?

You'd still make me marry him, wouldn't you?"

Tears stream down my face, and I can feel mascara dripping down my cheeks. Everything is falling apart, and the worst part is it doesn't matter to them.

My father stands there, looking at me with not an ounce of regret or pain or hurt. Just frustration and anxiety that I'm not telling him what he wants to hear.

That I'm not playing the part anymore.

"You don't care, do you?" I cough out, stumbling back farther away from him and closer to my car.

"I do care, Sage. I want a good life for you, and Easton can provide that, but—"

The waves surge higher, the creatures from the deep gnawing at my legs starting to work their way up. When you drown, your instincts tell you to kick, jump, anything because you're so desperate to reach that surface.

I stood still, letting it happen.

"If you say no, then I'll make Rose do it. And you know she will. Rosie is softhearted—she isn't calculated like you are. She'll do it because she loves you and doesn't want to see you unhappy. Just like I know if you love your sister, you won't do the same to her. Rose will not survive in a lifestyle like this, but you, Sage, you can thrive in it." The way he says it is so calm, like he practiced this speech in the mirror. As if this was the whole plan the entire time.

Everything is burning.

My ears, my lungs, my skin.

I'm standing outside, but I craved oxygen.

I grab the door handle to my car. I have no idea where I'd go, but I know I need out of here.

Pulling the door open to my car, I shove the keys inside the ignition. Just before shutting the door I look at my father.

"I hate you," I cry. "I hate you for using the only thing I care about in this godforsaken town against me. I fucking hate you." I seethe.

I slam my foot into the gas pedal, my speedometer climbing as I eat up the gravel beneath my car, uncaring if I reach an insane speed and flip this thing or wrap it around a tree.

Death feels easier than this right now.

I pull at my shirt collar, opening the buttons and scratching at my throat as I try to catch my breath. My chest is aching as the reality of my life slices me open with a dull blade. The pinpricks on my feet almost distract me from the throbbing inside my brain.

I'd been having episodes like these since middle school, and I once used the school computer to Google my symptoms because I thought I was pregnant, only to find out they were called panic attacks.

Me, having panic attacks? There was no way. Until they kept happening, over and over again.

I'm used to getting them now, but not like this. Never this severe. I feel like there's something inside my body mauling me to get out, leaving nothing but tatters of ripped skin and leftover intestines like roadkill on the side of the fucking road.

I'm going crazy. I have to be.

How else would I explain where I ended up? How else could I explain pulling into the hidden drive to find the open field where at least seventy other cars are parked.

Crazy is the only way I could explain why I'd shown up here, looking for him.

"You know where to find me when you realize just how bored you are in your glasshouse, Sage."

Thinking clearly had gone out the window as I climb the grass hill, my heels sinking into the mud with each step. I can feel people staring, their whispers almost as loud as the car engines. All of them are thinking the same thought: what the hell am I doing at The Graveyard?

The Graveyard is an abandoned racetrack on the outskirts of Ponderosa Springs—a place where girls like me have no right to be. Everything that happens here is illegal, under the table, sketchy. People race on the broken asphalt and fight each other to bloody pulps in the center. Drugs are exchanged like candy, and cigarette smoke replaces oxygen.

You come here if you're looking for trouble.

The wind nips at my heels as I push past the rickety metal fence that prevents bystanders from going on the track. My eyes scan the pits where cars and bikes wait for their heat. I know he'll be there. He's here every weekend. Never misses a race and never loses. You'd have to be deaf not to hear about his reputation at the track.

I spot him without having to try. His hood is up, smoke rolling from his mouth, all alone and off to himself. Even when he tries to stay away from people, they seem to be watching him. He's hard not to watch.

Not caring about the rules or where I'm supposed to be, I cross the track towards the pits, making a straight-line for him, even if there is a set of cars racing headed around another curve and circling back to me.

"Girl, you can't be back there!" someone shouts at me, but I continue to ignore everyone else except him.

There is no fear. Just a knowing feeling that when I enter Rook Van Doren's own personal kingdom of the wicked, I'll be stuck there for a while.

An angel seeking Lucifer for freedom.

"Van Doren!" I call over the sound of roaring machines, my feet stepping off the track away from the incoming traffic.

Rook had been right when he told me I was bored in my glasshouse. I'm two breaths away from dying of lack of excitement in my life. It's always the same men, with their pressed suits and business conversations. The same gossip at brunches, the same faces, the same lies. All of it is recyclable bullshit, and I am so tired of it all.

I am tired.

I'm afraid because that would be my life. Not just for the remainder of the year, but for the rest of my existence. I would be stuck on the Ponderosa Springs' merry-go-round forever, all because my parents are broke and I don't want my sister to suffer.

Except for this moment right now. I have this moment.

And Rook is anything but boring.

His eyes follow the sound of his name until they find their target.

Me.

God, I want to choke the smug grin off his face. That "I knew you'd come looking for me" stare that eats up his entire presence. But I hate the feeling of drowning more than him being right about me.

"What the hell are you doing here—" He stops abruptly, pushing off the side of his bike and meeting me in the middle. His eyes search my face, zeroing in on my streaming mascara and obvious tear-filled eyes. Something in his body language shifts, going from full of himself to tense.

"What did he do?"

The way he shifts towards me more, examining the contours of my face. I'm getting another up close and personal view of those eyes everyone is so afraid of.

It's poetic almost, how the outer edges are pure green like new earth, but as you fall closer, the inner portion is a starburst of amber fire, swirling and eating up the green, all spiraling into one solid black pupil.

And that's what Lucifer saw when he was cast out of Heaven. The green of our planet before entering the flames of Hell. The story behind Rook's catastrophic nickname ties into him more and more.

I know he means Easton, and that's the last person in the world I want to speak about right now. Trying to laugh it off, I wipe at my face. "No, no, it's nothing like that. I—"

"Then what the fuck are you here for?"

I'm taken aback by how harsh his voice is, the way it slices through my attempt to cover up my pain, ripping my facade into shreds.

Did I do something wrong? Did I do something to make him angry?

Was I mistaken for coming here?

I sigh, shrugging. "Looking for a change of pace, I guess?" I offer a small joking smile, hoping we can brush over the reason I'm here.

Why, of all people to run to in this town, I came looking for him.

"The truth," he demands, just as he did in the theatre, refusing to let me leave without stealing a part of me that no one gets.

"Truth? I don't think I've told anyone that in a long time," I say, knowing he won't give me anything unless I'm honest with him.

My heart rattles inside of its cage, a wild animal tired of being contained within the walls of my own chest, ready to bare its teeth, show the world what it's made of.

When he doesn't say anything, just stares at me expectantly and takes another hit of his cigarette, I tell him what he needs to hear.

The truth.

"Because I need you." My words catch in a gust of wind as engines roar behind my head. My body pushes up from the bottom of the surface, emerging from the water with a gasp of air as I continue. "I need you to help me take the mask off. You're the only person I know not hiding from the world. You burn for it. This place, it's eating me alive, turning me into a person I don't recognize. Show me anarchy, show me something violent." I

shake my head, needing to feel that escape. “Show me all your truths, Rook. And I’ll show you mine.”

His eyes turn into an inferno, burning so bright, so green, it’s hypnotizing.

“You wanna take the mask off?” He picks up his helmet, pushing it towards me, the cool material pressing into my stomach. “Then take me to the place you hate most in the world, and I’ll show you how to make it choke on the ashes of the girl they left to burn.”

rook

I’d seen a lot of shit when I was stoned.

Sage Donahue walking out of a liquor store holding a bottle of strawberry-flavored vodka outside took the cake.

She had cleaned off her makeup in a gas station bathroom, the raccoon eyes far from sight, revealing every last one of her cinnamon-colored freckles. The glow from the artificial lights bounced off her skin.

This was an entirely new, Sage. One that, for as long as I’d lived in Ponderosa Springs, I had never seen before.

Pretty poison, Rook.

A creature made for deception. Made for killing.

Careful, I reminded myself.

The drive to her family’s lake house was quick considering she was in my ear, purring, *Faster, faster, faster*.

But the moments seemed to tick by because all I could focus on was the road and how she felt wrapped against me. Perched on the back of my bike, arms gripping me so tightly I could feel her nails digging into my hoodie. The tease of her force against my toned abdomen made my mouth water at the prospect of pain.

When we arrived, pulling into the gated drive of the lakefront home, I knew what was going to happen. There is a reason she brought me here. The question is, why this place? What does it mean to her?

Sage had hopped off the bike, asking me to get started, mentioning something about the bathroom before disappearing inside, leaving the door open for me to follow.

I move on autopilot. My actions are ones I've made many times before, the compulsion festering in my twitchy hands as I get to work. The steps are calculated; I'm a skilled surgeon at work when I unzip my bag and pull out the jug of gasoline, lighter fluid, and off-brand matches. Never my Lucky Stripes.

It's a shame, really. The two-story mansion looks like a joy for a family vacation. All the expensive furniture, the dishware, the carefully placed photos, all are going up in smoke within the next half hour.

Burning down places with ghosts. With memories. Something with substance—those are all my Achilles' heel, watching as all those suspended memories shoot up in a burst of orange haze, succumbing to nothing but ashes that would sink into the ground.

There's no other way to rid yourself of the past like setting it on fire.

My phone vibrates in my hoodie pocket as I'm about to pour gasoline onto the kitchen floor.

Where are you?

It's from Alistair. My first reaction is to say something funny, like *giving a rich girl the night of her life*. But then I pause, my fingers hovering over the keyboard.

I'm assuming he's had a shitty day at home and he's in need of some therapy. Any other time I'd say yes, meet him in his basement where he works out, and let him pummel me into a pulp.

Most friends have things that bond them. Ours just happen to work differently than others.

Alistair needs to hurt something every once in a while, slam his fist into a body so that all the wrath can leave his for a split moment, craving vengeance for a family that always treated him as "the other."

He needs that, and I need the pain.

That's how we work. How we all connect to one another. We understand what the other needs, no matter how dark and tormented it may be. We're willing to do anything for each other.

Instead of my initial answer, I shoot him back a text letting him know I'm out for a ride and won't be back till later and that I'll meet up with him tomorrow.

I've never lied to him, any of them, but this needs to be felt out before the boys know.

The truth is, I don't trust this girl.

But I trusted the girl in front of me at the track. The one who looked broken and distraught. I trusted the girl on that stage, and until the only version of Sage Donahue I get is the real one, she'll be my secret.

However, we aren't starting out on the best foot, considering she'd told me she was headed to the bathroom and I'm watching her throw her shoes off in the yard as she makes her way down to the dock that juts into the water.

She's already bending the truth she so desperately promised me.

I set the jug down on the counter, walking out of the glass sliding door to follow her. The bottle of opened vodka sits beside her on the edge of the wooden platform, her feet dangling off the edge. It's dark, just the moon lighting the opaque lake that sits still and peaceful.

"You know, the whole point of this was for *you* to set the fire. I'm just the manufacturer behind it."

She raises the bottle to her lips and takes a gulp from the foul-smelling liquid. I grin when she coughs a bit, her body shivering as it tries to reject the burn from the alcohol.

"It looks easier in the movies to do that without a chaser." She coughs, wiping her mouth with the back of her palm.

"Yeah, well, in the movies, they use water," I grunt as I ease down onto my ass, sitting next to her with the bottle between us. "And if you see someone who can down vodka without a chaser like that? They have wounds that sting worse than the alcohol."

I look out across the lake at all the empty houses, their vacant windows and unlit back porches.

"We used to come here all the time when I was young for summer vacation. Rose and I would lie on this dock after we spent the day paddling through the water in the canoe, guessing the shapes in the clouds. Lay out here so long that we came in burnt to a crisp. Who knew the sun could pierce through clouds that much." She laughs, grabbing at the neck of the bottle again, holding it between her legs.

It had been a long time since I'd heard someone speak about good memories of childhood. Even longer since I knew what it felt like.

I'd become a stranger to my own upbringing.

There are times I remember watching my mother prune her roses out back and how her lemonade tasted after I ran around the yard all day. Or the smell of fresh-baked bread in the kitchen and the sound of laughter.

I remember them, but it's like they happened to another person.

As if I was a ghost in the home, watching my young self, never truly experiencing those moments of joy.

Now, they don't even seem real. Mirages I'd made up so my conscious mind could deal with my current home life.

"When we came inside, giggling, sun drunk, happy, my mother looked at us as if we'd committed treason." She swings her arm out, pointing to the bleak water, a stern frown on her face. "She'd say, 'Girls! Women pay millions to fix wrinkles and saggy skin from staying out too much in the sun. You'll ruin that tight skin. And Sage, you know better. Rosie's skin is going to turn tan by tomorrow, and you're going to look like an oversized tomato for weeks!'"

"So I was right all along. Your mom is a cunt."

"She is. She always has been." Sage laughs, nodding in agreement. Sobering up, she continues. "That was the first time I remember being jealous of my sister. The first time this ugly, green thing made me angry at someone I have always admired."

I let her talk freely, listening to her words as she spills her guts out while simultaneously filling it with liquor.

"The jealousy only grew over the years. After what happened here, after what they let him do to me when all the lights were out and the parties ended, I got mean and spiteful. Putting gum in her hair once while she slept. Covered her sneakers in mud. Said horrible things, all the while thinking why was I the one he touched. Why he passed her bedroom, only to sneak into mine." Her voice chokes on tears she won't let fall, refusing to be that vulnerable with me.

"It was a vicious cycle that led me here to this point of hating myself. Instead of wishing it never happened to either of us, I was furious it wasn't happening to Rose. Envious that she was so blissfully unaware and happy. God, how awful is that? How awful am I?"

My fingers tighten around the Zippo in my hoodie pocket at the thought of an innocent little girl conditioned to hate her other half, groomed and defiled when she was only a child. While I'm not one to speak on good

deeds or human decency, even I know how disgusting it was. How fucking nasty her parents are for letting it happen, for not choking that son of a bitch with their bare hands.

Sage is living a life without justice. Alone.

“I love my sister, Rook. I know how I felt, what I’ve done to her was wrong, and I’d do anything in the world to take it back. I would do anything to protect her from something bad happening again, to protect her from our parents, from me—”

“Don’t compare yourself to them,” I interrupt, looking over at her.
“You were a child.”

She meets my gaze, hair wild and knotted from the bike ride here.
“But I’m not now.”

“And there is still time to be different, make amends. Rose loves you, defends your every breath. There aren’t burned bridges there,” I tell her.

We’d never seen the two of them argue in person besides the diner, but even when Alistair would make a snarky comment about Sage being a bitch, Rose would bite his head off.

They are twins, after all, no matter the hurt that lingers between them.

“I wouldn’t know how to be different. Not here. Here I feel like I’m drowning constantly, suffocating just below the surface. I’m under this lake screaming for someone to help, for someone to save me, and they all just sit at the dock. Watching me.”

Tension eats at me, ready to give her this tiny piece of revenge over the crimes committed. Ready to blast this house to fucking shambles and all the bad memories inside of it.

Maybe then she’ll be able to swim to the surface.

With a sigh, she stands up, legs wobbling as she tries to gain her footing. I swiftly grab at her waist while rising from my own sitting position, holding her steady so she doesn’t *actually* drown in the lake.

“Easy. Booze doesn’t make people the most coordinated creatures in the world, ya know.”

The softness of her body feels odd beneath my firm hands. It’s unlike anything I’ve ever felt. Sure, I’ve touched women, but they were all passing cars looking to get their ticket punched, there for the sake of saying, “I fucked a Hollow Boy.”

I can really feel Sage beneath my palms, breathing in her strawberry-scented breath, counting the freckles on her cheeks. For a girl the world thought was made of plastic, God, she feels so fucking real.

“I don’t think I’ve talked this much about myself or my past in, well, ever really.” She laughs. “This feels like a confessional. I think you missed your calling, Van Doren. You should’ve become a priest.”

“Well, I’ve got bad news for you, Theatre Geek.” My hands feel twitchy for a different reason all of a sudden, my grip tightening on her. “You’re confessing your truths to Lucifer. Who knows what I’ll do with them.”

Her eyes are so fucking blue I swear to God they glow, the tilt of her head exposing her neck as the wind catches her hair. I chew my bottom lip, silent, dirty thoughts creeping up the back of my spine.

I’d like to leave that neck purple with marks. That skin blistering with the imprint of my hand. The inside of her quaking, filled, spent with me and only me. I’d make her come all the while she screamed for mercy, begging for the pleasure to stop because it was too much.

“You believe them, don’t you? All the people who call you the devil?”

Clever girl, trying to turn the tables onto me.

“When you are told things so often, even if they aren’t true, you start to believe them.” I raise my hand, pushing a piece of hair behind her ear. “Make no mistake, Sage. I’m not a good person. It’ll be good for you to remember that.”

I’m no knight in shining armor or sweet shoulder to cry on.

I could be her reckoning, help her seek revenge, even show her how pain mixed with pleasure feels, but I’m not the guy at the end of her happily ever after.



CHAPTER NINE

the fire that never goes out

sage

I can't stop thinking about him.

As I made breakfast, I burnt my finger on the toaster, thinking of his touch.

In the shower, when I close my eyes, I see his face. Square jaw, half-mast, glassy eyes that looked lifeless to others, but to me, they hold so much more.

When Easton slipped that diamond ring over my finger today, I thought of him ripping it off with a look of disgust.

All I can think about is how terribly fucked I am because all I can think about is Rook Van Doren.

I should be thinking of a plan of escape, a way to get myself out of this arranged marriage, one I hadn't been privy to. One I didn't get a say in, because I can't let them do this to Rose.

The only favor Easton or his family are willing to do for me is keeping it quiet until after graduation. The agreement is in place, but we'll wait to announce it, buying me a bit more time.

My fingers had itched to touch Rook's hair two nights ago, curling my nails into the luscious brown locks and tugging a little, just to see if he liked it.

I shouldn't be thinking of him, not like this, not when I know I can't give him a future. Hell, I won't be able to give him anything with this rock on my finger.

Thinking of him will only lead to bad things, I know that, but thinking is all I have.

Imagining is all I can get.

In real life, I have to continue ignoring him. Which is easy considering he doesn't have my phone number, but at school, God, it's hard to avoid him. When I feel their presence in the hall, I shove myself into the nearest classroom, sprint in the opposite direction, hide behind doors.

I don't want him to see me because I don't want to tell him the truth.

Shouts of joy ricochet outside the closed door of our home theatre room, and my head falls into the black leather reclining seats, hoping if I press hard enough, I will disappear inside of it.

The last thing I want to be doing tonight is host a Halloween party. Luckily for me, Lizzie and Mary are making up for my absence. I hadn't even wanted to throw this thing, but when my friends heard my parents would be out of town with Easton and his father, they begged to use my house.

I stayed long enough to pose for pictures so they could be plastered all over Facebook and Instagram, but I quickly disappeared into this room in the back of the house. It's mostly quiet, and I know no one will come looking for me in here.

My tattered script of *A Midsummer's Night Dream* is in serious need of some TLC, but I've flipped through these pages so much, there isn't much I could do for them at this point.

Happy Halloween to me.

The lights in the room start to flicker, the sound of the switch being toyed with echoing. I squint as I look at the door, confused as to who would be coming in here.

"You've been ignoring me, TG."

I almost scream at the sound of his voice, a part of me thinking it was a figment of my needy imagination, until my eyes see him leaning on the doorframe.

Wasn't sure when backwards flat bills and Thrasher t-shirts became something I was attracted to, but it's happening. It's less about the clothes and more about how he wears them.

Pieces of his hair flip out from underneath the cap, arms exposed and showing off his impressive veins that probably make nurses faint.

"What are you doing here?" I hiss, standing up abruptly to make sure no one had seen him come inside the room. I'd almost forgotten about my costume until his eyes eat me up in my costume.

“Silas is out fucking your sister somewhere. I’ve got a few hours to kill before I meet up with Thatch and Alistair. I didn’t wanna miss your party. I’m sad I didn’t get an invitation.” He tilts his head, mocking me.

“You can’t be in here. We can’t be seen together,” I insist, hoping he gets the hint and makes this easy.

Leave, leave, leave, I silently beg. *Leave before this gets worse.*

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?” I can’t help but watch the way his match rolls across his dark red lips.

“You know why, Rook. Listen.” I take the headdress off my head. “The other night I was upset and got really drunk. I said some things that—”

“Nah.” He pushes off the doorframe. “You’re not doing that.”

“Doing what? Telling you the truth? Isn’t that what you want? I can’t be seen with you—you have no idea the damage it will do. It’ll ruin everything.”

“You’re not going to sit there and pretend you didn’t come to me the other night, crying, broken, searching for help. Not your boyfriend, not your friend, not even your fucking sister—you came looking for *me*. You don’t get to pretend you didn’t promise me all your truths. There is no putting the mask back on after I’ve already seen what’s underneath it.”

My heart is in my throat, clogging my airway with violent throbs. I know he’s right, but God, if Easton finds out—if his father finds out? All hell would break loose.

“That doesn’t matter. I know what I did! It was a onetime thing. If anyone found out—if Easton found out—it would not end well.”

He grins wide, like I’m daring him to test Easton. Something I’m sure he’d do in a heartbeat, just for fun. “You think I’m scared of your boat-shoe-wearing boy toy?”

“Not the point, Rook!”

“If it was a onetime thing, tell me why wouldn’t you let me burn the lake house down? Why’d you back out of it? Come on, TG. Tell me what you said before we left.”

Checkmate.

He’s got me. He knows the answer already. I’d told him, and I know he remembers. He’d looked at me like he would never forget it after I said it.

“I-I can’t remember. I was drunk.” My lying has always been impossible to see through, but it’s like everything I knew went out the window with him.

“No, you remember.” He walks closer to me, staring down at me, and picks up a few locks of my hair. “What was it? Something like, you couldn’t do it because it was ours now. It’s your confessional—that’s what you said right before you puked all over my shoes.”

Embarrassment heats my cheeks. Emotions I haven’t encountered in years bubble up when I’m around him, and I hate it because he knows it.

“You rehearse lines in the dark at parties. You’re not the dull, rich girl everyone thinks you are. I’ve already seen what’s underneath, Sage.”

And you’re the guy who believes he is evil. That he doesn’t deserve happiness, I think to myself but don’t say it out loud. He may not have said it out loud, but I see it on his face.

Frustrated and annoyed, I run a hand through my hair. “Just, shut the damn door at least,” I mumble, stepping to the side and closing the theatre room door, encasing us with dim lighting.

He makes himself at home, dropping down with a thud as he takes my original seat and picks up my script, thumbing through it.

“So what are you supposed to be dressed up as? Hugh Hefner’s wife?”

I look down at my outfit. The skintight black leather dress paired with the matching fishnets definitely gives off Playboy Bunny vibes, but the cross around my neck plus the headdress I’d taken off made it pretty obvious.

“I’m a nun. Liz is a demon, and Mary is an angel.”

“No priest to keep you in order?” He quirks an eyebrow, smirking as he looks away from the pages.

“That was Easton’s gig, but he’s out of town with his father.” I walk in front of him, then take the adjacent seat, making sure there is plenty of space between us.

“Why am I not surprised that he was playing the self-righteous?”

I snort, trying not to laugh but agreeing without saying the words outright.

“Let me guess, you’re dressed as an asshole?” I ask, matching his raised eyebrow with one of my own. I take a second to look his outfit up and down.

Wickedly, he rolls his tongue across his upper teeth, lifting his pointer fingers to his head and wiggling them. “Born with horns, TG, born with horns.”

I try not to stare too hard as he pulls the match from his mouth, grabbing the rolled blunt from behind his ear. Like magic, he lights the red end of the match with his fingers, something I’m sure he’d practiced for years in his bedroom before he got it right.

Smoke rolls from the tip as he inhales, chest expanding as he fills his lungs, the orange glow burning bright.

The smell of the weed permeates my senses, bold and strong. I’d always been told it smells bad, but it’s the opposite. It smells floral and full of citrus, making my nose tingle and my mouth water for a food that doesn’t exist.

Thick clouds of smoke fall from his lips as he releases it, the white smog filtering up to the top of the room.

“You ever smoked before? Or do you just limit yourself to strawberry vodka?” His voice is huskier, edgier, but it feels smooth against my skin.

“Never tried it, but I’m not opposed to it. Just never had the opportunity.”

With slow movements, he looks over at me, the blunt resting in his mouth as he crooks a finger at me. “Come here.”

This is my ultimate transgression. The snake luring Eve into the Garden of Eden for a taste of the forbidden fruit. I just can’t tell if Rook is the snake or the fruit—maybe both.

There’s a reason I was avoiding him. I knew it would be bad if we were around each other again. I’d let my guard down, all my walls, and now I have no defenses against him or his hazy eyes that seem to lure me in.

I knew that being around him would make me feel good, just like it had at the lake house. That I wouldn’t want to be the Sage everyone else sees. I’d just want to be me.

I blame my hormones, my curiosity, and whatever deity had blessed Rook Van Doren with the face of an angel and the body of a god.

The leather whines as I scoot closer, our knees knocking together. Assuming this was close enough was a mistake. As soon as I’m within reach, he curls one arm behind my back, swinging me up and onto his lap.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I press my palms into his chest so I can remove myself from his body, but his arm stays locked around my waist, pressing down so my ass is digging into his lap.

“Sit,” he orders. “When I blow, you open those pretty lips, okay, doll?”

The grip loosens, and my hips relax. His hand draws a path up my body, fingertips scratching against my fishnets, raking up my side, ghosting over me. I keep my eyes locked on his while he presses his hand through my hair to grab the back of my neck.

He takes a drag, holding the smoke inside of his chest and using his leverage to pull me closer to his face. I move gradually, a tiny grain of sand suspended in the hourglass.

I catch a glimpse of a scar on his upper lip, my tongue licking the same place on my own mouth.

His lips pucker, a stream of vapor passing them. My body acts of its own accord, opening like he told me to. We float above each other, so close that I can almost picture how his kiss would be. I’m so aware of how warm he is, how broad he feels beneath my hips.

All the while, we watch each other move.

Every shift, every shudder, we breathe each other in.

Smoke starts to fill my mouth up, and my lungs sting at the intrusion as I inhale until he’s finished. I hold it inside until I can’t any longer, then release a cloud that wraps around his face like fog.

There’s an intense urge to pull away and cough, but Rook’s lips are so close, his hand holding me steady like he knows I’ll try to move from him. A beat passes before he lifts the brown stick back to his lips with lazy movements.

This is called shot-gunning. I’d watched it in movies and seen it once at a party, but I never knew it could feel this good.

How an act so simple, something depicted as trashy, could be charged with so much tension.

We sit there continuing the process, over and over again.

And I can’t remember a single time I’d felt this unbothered. All I’m focused on is how he feels, how he smells, the way he looks. I’m enveloped in Rook’s little world, and I don’t want to leave.

My entire life had been spent around fabricated relationships that barely scratched the outer level of who I am. I was existing in a superficial world, like Barbie trapped in her plastic box.

Until this. Until him.

Ten years down the road, I'd still never be able to find the words for it.

Despite what everyone said, what they will continue to say, despite the anarchy he raises, Rook Van Doren is what truly living feels like. This substantial, nebulous force that could never be watered down or put out.

"The fire which never goes out," I whisper out loud, without thinking fully.

My head feels light, buzzing on a different wavelength than normal. Everything feels more intense—the music from the party thudding in my ears, the way Rook's thighs shift beneath me, the smell of the weed.

He sets the half-smoked blunt right side up in the cup holder, the cherry still burning bright.

"Are you going to be the person who gets philosophical when they're high?" His mouth tilts up in the corner, giving me a sharp grin.

"No, no." I shake my head, my hair falling in front of me. "Homer, he wrote in *The Iliad* about the natural gases that sprout from the cracks of limestone in the mountains near Olympus. He called them 'the fire which never goes out.' I think that's you."

I recline from him, letting my head hang back, my hands still resting on his chest as I roll my body, experiencing something that feels out of my control. I'm flying, soaring above the clouds.

My skin feels like Pop Rocks, humming. A pressure settles on my hips, and my eyes drop to Rook's hands that strain against me, holding me dangerously still. This spot has me feeling how much this position affects him.

Throbbing spreads to my core as I felt the heat from his erection pressed into me. Butterflies flutter in my center, my heartbeat falling straight down from my chest.

Intensity builds inside of me, and my lust begins to chase more pleasure, my hips moving despite his death hold on me, rocking forward, then back.

Once, twice.

“Sage,” he grits out between clenched teeth, “either stop moving or get fucked.”

In any other normal situation, I would have stopped. I would have snapped back to reality and told myself this was only going to make things terribly worse.

But it’s not normal.

It’s him.

So I grind into him once more. I trace the outline of his lips with the tip of my tongue. Just the little taste of him already has my blood pumping.

“I really want to kiss you right now,” I mumble, my tone veiled and deep. Without my mind’s consent, my hands clutch his Thrasher tee between my nimble fingers.

“Then kiss me.”

Grappling with the last pieces of my resolve, I reply, “We aren’t right for each other. This is going to end tragically. We don’t end up together in the end.”

I shiver when his rough palms rub up and down my thighs, his pointer finger desperately close to heading up my dress. I hadn’t even noticed how much the leather had ridden up my body, my ass practically hanging out.

“I can show you just how *right* we can feel together.”

“We can’t tell—oh!” I fall into a gasp as he discovers how exposed I really am. I hadn’t wanted panty lines in this dress, so I’d skipped them tonight. Now, I can feel his thumb rubbing up and down, smearing my wetness.

My nails dig into his shirt. “We can’t tell anyone,” I finish, trying to lift my hips towards his touch.

“Then it’ll be our dirty little secret,” he breathes against me as his teeth grab at my bottom lip.

I’m giving up, giving in. I can feel my body heating with need, wanting more than his skilled fingers. My throat constricts as his thumb presses into my sensitive bud, lazy circles that make my toes curl.

I press my hands up past his shoulders, holding his neck. “Can you do that, Rook? Can you keep your mouth shut and be my dirty little secret?”

Forcefully, he grabs the back of my head, molding our lips together, sealing this deal for however long it may last. The feeling of his velvet tongue tangling with mine makes me moan. Everything feels hot, like I’m

attached to a heater. I scramble to move my mouth at the same pace, matching his hunger.

Wrong, wrong, wrong.

You are going to hurt yourself, hurt him. You know there is no light at the end of this tunnel. No way out from underneath your parents' thumb without them taking Rose.

Except I'm selfish.

I'm so fucking selfish to give in to this, but everything just feels so...

Right.

He forcefully pulls my lips off his, staring at me with a heated glare. His pink lips glisten, making me want more.

“You okay with this?”

And it's this—this exact reason—why I can't keep my heart safe from him. The reason I'm not able to separate it from this situation. Sure, I could make this only about sex, but not when he asks me things like that.

How is it that Rook has been the only man to ask me that question? To know by my body how badly I want him but still wants to hear the words.

How he is the villain to everyone else, but not a single man depicted as a hero had asked for permission? Only taking, taking, taking, until there was nothing left of the old Sage.

Rook didn't realize it, but he is giving those pieces back to me one snarky comment at a time.

“Yes, God, yes,” I whisper without hesitation.

“I always knew there was a darker side to you, Sage, but not wearing panties?” he breathes onto my lips. “Who knew you were such a slut.”

All feminism has apparently left my body, because the way he grunts that crude name makes my thighs shudder with anticipation.

Sexual repression was something I had lived with for so long, but this?

It feels like more of a sexual awakening.

My legs open wider for him to get a better view of just how wet I am.

“I didn't want lines in my dress,” I offer.

“Mmmhhh,” he hums as he leaves kisses along the valley of my breasts, his tongue sweeping down below the leather fabric—a warning before I feel the sharp bite through the material as he takes one of my pearlled nipples into his mouth. “Admit it. You wanted someone to find you

in here. All lonely, with nothing covering that pink cunt. You wanted someone to see just how exposed you were. You like it, don't you?"

The room begins to spin, all my senses completely tethered to him. His hands grope at my ass, using it as leverage to rock his covered length into my center. The delicious friction builds as butterflies swarm my stomach.

God, it's never felt this good.

Craving more, thirsty for more than foreplay, I drop my hands to his lap. My nimble fingers work on his button and zipper. I ghost past the shadows in his jeans, feeling him, knowing he wants this just as bad as I do, but he's refusing to help me pull his jeans off, or at least down enough so he is exposed.

"Rook, some help?" I groan, hating how gutted I sound, how needy.

"I'm not doing shit until you tell me what I want to hear." His mouth continues to assault my neck and chest, the cool air making goosebumps race across my body as it hits the warm places on my throat where his wet tongue had been.

"You want me to tell you—"

"Confess," he butts in, grabbing a fistful of my hair. "I want you to tell me the truth. You wanted me to find you like this, didn't you? That you like being my dirty, fucking secret, my dirty slut. Confess all your sins to your very own devil."

That word again, rubbing me in all the places I never knew I needed. Being degraded, pushed beneath his metaphorical hold on me, while also chasing his approval, wanting to tell him to make him want me just as terribly as I want him.

It's all so fucked. So hazy.

I would have said anything to have him inside me.

My breath shakes as I look up from his waist, diving into his hellfire eyes that spark and sizzle in the dim light. Such a unique version of hazel that you have to wonder if his mother really did conceive him with something otherworldly.

"I wanna be your slut, Rook," I whisper, pressing my mouth into his for a kiss that feels like falling. My heart races inside my rib cage, thudding over and over again. "I like it."

The sound of fabric ripping filters into the room, and I gasp as I look down at my torn tights, a slit in the center of the already holey material.

“My cock isn’t fitting inside those fishnet holes.” He grunts, raising his hips to shove his tight jeans down his waist enough to release himself.

I widen my eyes, looking down as his cock rests against his stomach. My shock doesn’t come from his obvious size or the veins that climb the shaft but the four shiny metal beads that surround the head: two barbells pierced through the tip, one running vertically and the other horizontally.

“Does that hurt?” I ask, looking up at him briefly.

I’ve only had sex with one other person, and he was certainly not pierced.

“Not for you.” He winks, smirking.

I palm his length, pumping up and down slowly, just thinking of all the ways this is going to feel.

“Tell me you’re clean.” I irresponsibly want him to say yes so that I can inform him I’m on the pill. I’ve never gone raw before, but I want to feel him.

All of him.

“Wouldn’t have my dick this close to your raw pussy if I wasn’t, Sage.”

It’s all I need to hear, my body tired of waiting.

I raise my hips, directing his cock to my entrance.

Lowering myself onto him gradually, I feel every single inch enter me at my own pace. I whimper as I feel him stretch me open, forcing his way into my dripping walls. I can’t help but look down, watching the process. Watching how fucking good we look coming together.

It’s almost an unbearable amount of pleasure that rides through me when I’m fully sitting on his lap. His entire length partially impales me, so deep, I can feel him in my stomach.

Sex has always been a means to an end. An action where I shut my mind off, waiting for it to be finished.

I never want this to stop. This is more than sex for me.

The sound of him groaning turns my attention back to him. I desperately want a camera for this so I could capture this moment and use it years later when I’m long forgotten from his memory. It’s better than porn.

His head and arms are thrown back over the cushion of the seat, all the veins in his tan throat bulging as he flexes his jaw, grunting out, “Goddamn.”

I’m a live wire of sensations in this ethereal moment that I can’t fathom happening with anyone else. Eager to please him and craving release, I start to lift my hips up and down.

That’s when I feel the full effects of his piercing.

It rubs every inch of me on the inside, tickling that sensitive spot along with every other spot. It’s touching everywhere all at once, so many places, it’s overwhelming. I feel myself drowning his length in my juices. My limbs feel light and heavy at the same time as I roll my hips against him.

With practiced ease, he plucks the blunt up, positioning it between his fingers and enjoying another drag while I ride him. A groan rumbles in his chest, letting me know what I’m doing is working for him just as much as it is me.

“Little whore looks so good ridin’ my cock,” he mumbles, full of rasp, low eyes watching me through the smoke.

My mind is horrified at my body’s betrayal. The new word of humiliation crashes over me like lava.

Some steady R&B plays outside, my body moving to its rhythm. The beat thumps inside my stomach as I shift up, then back down his dick, taking every painfully delish inch all over again.

Flipping the blunt between his fingers, he holds it to my lips, letting me take a hit for myself. It’s all slow motion as I inhale, letting the smoke glorify this moment even more.

Keeping it in my chest, I lean into him, pressing my mouth onto his. Kissing each other as the smoke passes through our bodies, we share more than just vapor, more than just sex.

We are breathing each other.

We finish the blunt until it’s out, tossed onto the floor. My pussy is soaked, thoroughly stretched and perfected for his cock.

Even though his movements feel hazy, my pace isn’t enough for him anymore. He let me play, but now it’s his turn. He encircles my waist, forcing me down his shaft. Our bodies scoot to the edge of the seat so that he can piston his hips into my tight hole.

With vicious rage, he rips the front of my dress down, exposing my breasts. He doesn't give me a moment to settle because soon my nipple is between his teeth, his soft tongue spinning circles around the pebbled bead.

"Rook, oh my God," I pant, sweat already sticking to my forehead.

We move together in sync, rocking our bodies into one another. I feel every single thrust, letting our bodies slam together over and over again. My head lolls back while my fingers bury themselves into his shoulder blades.

"Harder," he growls, my grip pushing him to hammer into me at a much faster speed.

White, blinding heat sears my mind, so far gone that all I can do is follow his direction. I bore my nails into his skin, knowing soon I'll bring blood—I have to be.

"I'm going to come. Make me come, please," I cry wildly, suddenly not caring if anyone walks in or hears us.

"Beg for it. Beg me for it, whore."

I nod eagerly. "Please, please, Rook. God, please."

His hand grabs for my throat, squeezing. "God doesn't exist here. Just me."

I'm aching all over. Liquid fire has been poured directly into my bloodstream, and my entire body is an all-consuming inferno as I climb higher towards my orgasm. Stars start spinning in the corner of my vision.

I quiver, the air taken out of my lungs as ecstasy pumps in my veins. All that comes from me are shrill, broken cries as he continues to plunge, flutters and spasms racking through me. Pleasure thrums through my body, toes curling as I drift through the most intense orgasm of my life.

"Beautiful," he utters huskily. I'm not even sure that's what I actually heard, too numb from bliss to truly comprehend.

My limbs are Jell-O, my eyes shut tight as he races after his own release, pumping with ruthless thrusts that make my core tighten with indescribable pleasure. I'm in desperate need of a drink, but I can't bring myself to stop.

Not when he's watching my ass bounce against his pelvis as his cock slides into my depths so fiercely. Rook's fingers delve between my thighs, finding my clit and immediately applying pressure.

"Wait, wait, I can't. S-so sensitive," I whimper, my hand shooting down to his wrist, gripping it to try and prevent him from making my entire

body combust. It's so intense that I can feel my eyes start to water.

His fingers don't stop, and neither do his hips, "One more. Be my good little slut, baby. One more." He moans, his thumb speeding up to match his thrusts.

That familiar build hits my core, a long whine falling from my lips. "Fuck, I can't," I mewl, but my body says otherwise, pussy tightening around him once again.

"You can. You can because I said so."

And I do.

I come again, sucking him in like a vise, so snugly he can barely push back inside of me.

My cries are strangled as I sink into euphoria for the second time. Rook's broken growl mixed with a moan rips from his lungs as he pushes into me farther, staying buried while he empties himself entirely.

I'm sluggish, the high from the orgasm still clouding my brain as I drop my head onto his shoulder, feeling his breath on my moist, flushed skin. Those long eyelashes tickle the side of my face.

I can barely feel his fingers when they start playing with my hair, twirling around the already curled strands. Each breath is full of his scent, locking me into this moment.

I so badly want to stay in this state of elation for just a bit longer, wanting to lock that door forever and stay safely inside where Ponderosa Springs and its monsters can't reach us.

Instead, all there is is the gripping feeling of dread.

Knowing I'll have to lie to Rook about one very, crucial detail.

We can never, be together.

And when he finds out why?

This secret we created is going to end in unmitigated catastrophe.



CHAPTER TEN

what the devil deserves

rook

“No, no, you have to finish it. This is the best part!” Her hand grabs at my forearm, pulling me back down to the makeshift pallet on the floor piled with blankets she insisted she needed.

“I’m developing cataracts the longer I sit and watch these,” I grunt, hoping when she says it’s almost over she’s telling the truth.

The mob is going about it all wrong. If they want to torture people, they don’t need to do it with rats and knives. Black-and-white films without sound are more than enough to make someone talk, just so they could put an end to it.

For two months, I’ve watched more movies than I have in my entire life. I’m so close to telling Sage we could watch *Sixteen Candles* for the third time if she turned off Charlie Chaplin.

“Wait for it, wait for it,” she says, sinking her nails into my skin as she gets more excited. “Tomorrow the birds will sing. Be brave. Face life.” She reads the words as they appear on the crackling screen.

The old film camera was a breath away from falling apart and hadn’t been made for clear pictures apparently. The entire time I felt like I was looking at it through a static TV.

“That’s what we were waiting for?” I ask, raising my eyebrow with bored eyes, teasing her.

She grins, smacking me on the chest with some force behind it.

“You’re such an ass! This is golden! If only one of Charlie’s movies could be played in history, everyone would agree, *City Lights* is it!”

“Quentin Tarantino would possibly disagree.”

“Ugh, men and their bloody movies with explosive cars.” She rolls her eyes, turning her body to face me as she crosses her legs, and I prepare for

what is about to come. This is a thing I've noticed she does, and truthfully, it isn't the movies that bother me. I'm frustrated by the fact they *don't* bother me.

How I've allowed myself to sit through these, not paying attention to a single thing, just so I can watch what she's about to do now.

I've allowed myself to care.

"This is real satire, the ability to move people without even using words, Rook! Period films didn't need to rely on the emotional impact of color to invoke emotion, to captivate an audience. They didn't need the crimson blood or the golden jewels. They had soft candlelight reflecting off glossy silks and satin dresses. Old Westerns, where I swear you can taste the sandy dust blowing in the wind, the sun glinting off shiny spurs, sepia-filtered cigarette smoke, and passionate embraces. People were enthralled with the motion picture, with the feelings..." She drags off, waiting for her next thought about the cinema to hit her, moving her hands in tiny circles as if she's trying to show her brain how to speed up the process of collecting thoughts.

"So you're saying you'd rather watch these than *The Outsiders* or that one with all the school delinquents?" I offer her a line, giving her another thought to run away with.

The bun in her hair had been tossed in is falling down her head, loose pieces bouncing as she speaks.

"*The Breakfast Club*. You'd think you'd remember it by now. I'd rather not choose—I love both. But that was a different time for film altogether. The fact that up until me you'd never even watched some of these is a tragedy, an actual tragedy. Old Hollywood is the foundation for every movie made since the age died out. They can change lives and shape societies. I mean, *Jaws* birthed an entire generation terrified of the water and gave them a fear they'll carry with them forever. A low-budget horror movie made one of the greatest directors of all time a household name. Speaking of low-budget, *Rocky*, a monumental franchise to just about anyone with eyeballs, was only made for a million dollars and went on to win Best Picture! Do you not see the power of a great story? Of a great movie?" She waits for me with bated breath to answer, not even realizing how she is rambling. Behind this lake house, she's spoken more about the things she's passionate about than she has in her entire life.

I take my bottom lip into my mouth, tasting the dried blood from earlier with my father, and look her over in my t-shirt and stripey leggings.

Her usual fashionable skirts and matching blouses are nowhere to be seen. In their place is whatever shirt I'd worn that day. I love getting to strip her down out of those statement pieces to a matching panty-and-bra set.

I'd spent all of this time noticing little things about her. Learning her.

Still not understanding the reason behind having her nails the same color for a whole month before changing it.

"So movies, the scripts, that's the future for you, yeah? LA? Hollywood?"

She breathes, looking over at the rolling credits. "The scripts are for theatre, which is an entirely different love for me. I adore being onstage, embodying a character's emotions. Chameleon myself into whatever the play needs me to be. I'd love to do that in college, ya know? Get my degree, then graduate and maybe shift to on-screen acting, eventually reaching the point of making my own films or at the very least directing."

There is a sadness in her voice, one I've come to recognize every time she speaks about what lies ahead of her in the future. Like she'll never do it, like she isn't capable.

This place had taken her and clipped her wings before she even knew she had them.

"Sure, I could go to New York, fall in love with Broadway. Make a career directing in the concrete jungle. But no matter how hard it tries, New York isn't Hollywood. There is no Walk of Fame or years of history embedded in the golden ages. Everyone is an actress or a filmmaker there, but actually doing it? Succeeding at it? What other dream could you have?"

Two months I've spent sitting here, watching her, learning her, listening to her. Hating myself for every second I enjoy it. Why do I deserve to enjoy anything? Especially someone like Sage.

When I met her, I had the preconceived notion that she was as cruel on the inside as she was on the outside. A fun little challenge to roll around with in the sheets, a girl who would hate me as much as I hate myself.

Instead, I found a girl who'd been buried alive in the expectations of others, and every day we spend together, she uncovers herself more and more.

She's turning into what I don't need, making me feel things I have no right to feel.

What right do I have to see her like this? Happy, babbling on, and vulnerable. I've done nothing good in my life to merit this.

I did not earn happiness like this, and taking it feels wrong. It doesn't feel right.

But giving it up, saying no to it? That feels fucking worse.

"What? What are you looking at?" she asks me, making me realize I had been staring.

"Nothing." I shake my head. "Just selfishly glad I'm the only person who sees you like this."

She arches one eyebrow, her freckles shifting, hundreds of them that I'd once tried counting as she fell asleep on my lap after eating an entire pizza on her own. She's one of those people who enjoys pineapple on it, which is disgusting, but something about salty-sweet combinations is what she likes.

"Yeah? Why's that?"

I lean forward, grabbing the back of her neck and licking the chocolate from her bottom lip that she hadn't noticed, sucking it into my mouth to clean it. A moan comes from the back of her throat.

"Because I'd become a serial killer trying to fend off men falling in love with you."

Those blue-flame eyes could heat an entire village with how bright they are glowing, her mouth slightly gaping at me.

It's true—people would have to be stupid not to love this version of her, and I feel like shit that she's giving it to me, and I'll never be able to feel that way.

I'm not allowed to love people.

But thinking of anyone else trying?

It makes my blood sizzle.

This is mine. Her truths. Her quirks. They're mine.

She is mine. Unable to love or not.

Her fingers press into my skin, and I hiss, "Goddamn, why are you always so cold."

"So you can warm me up. Ya know, I'm cold, and you're hot. It just works."

Her phone buzzes before I can kiss her again, eyes averting to the screen. Something in her dies when she reads the text, immediately telling me it's Easton or her parents.

"It's just stupid shit I read on the internet, nothing important."

She pulls away from my grip, standing up and grabbing the empty bowl that had earlier been filled with popcorn, heading to the kitchen.

My jaw sets, tension building in my chest. I watch her as I grab my Zippo, flipping it across my fingers and watching as the flame dances through.

"What did he want?" I ask, knowing it's him.

My mouth fills with a nasty-tasting bitterness. It makes me want a smoke, to cover the annoyance building in my body.

"Wanted to know where I was. We're supposed to meet for dinner tonight with my parents."

I look at the blank screen, the sound of the film camera starting to itch the inside of my brain.

"You going?"

I turn my gaze back to her, and the refrigerator light illuminates the guilt on her face. She doesn't need to say anything to give me my answer. My gut twists and turns with rage.

"Of course you're going."

I lift myself from the ground, grabbing my hoodie and the beanie lying on the couch before throwing them on my body, then walk to the door to shove my feet inside my shoes.

Sage and I had these moments when everything seemed to halt in the outside world. We would leave Ponderosa Springs, come here, and lock ourselves within the walls of this house. Moments when she was who she wanted to be and where I was a person who had hope.

But there's always something that pulls us right back into the toxic sludge, reminding us of the truth, of our fate.

"That's not fair," she mutters, shutting the fridge. I hear her bare feet pad through the kitchen towards my back.

"What isn't?" I snap, turning to face her as she approaches, her body jumping from my sudden movement. "Is it the fact I'm sitting here with you reading scripts, watching movies every other day, and making your cunt

squirt on my cock, all the while he gets to parade you around school like you're some piece of glorified meat?"

My voice is red-hot, a searing slap to her delicate skin. When we're good, we're good. We're electric. An addictive, warm fire during the holidays that you could cuddle around for heat.

But when we're bad, when we argue, almost always having to do with Easton, it's bad. A storm of smoke and flames. An unmanageable wildfire that consumes everything in its path. She never backs down from my anger, and I don't coddle her.

"You know I can't break up with him! Not yet, I told you! I have to wait till graduation, Rook. You have no idea what my parents will do if I don't wait. We have to wait."

"Whatever. I'm out of here." I reach for the door while she grabs at me, trying to prevent me from being responsible and stopping this fight while we are ahead.

"You do this every time. You don't get to just walk out of this!" She raises her voice. "It's the same thing—you get upset, and instead of talking to me about your feelings, you shut me out, you leave! You did the same thing last week with the college applications! How am I supposed to understand why you're upset if you never talk to me about it."

My body becomes rigid, my relaxed nature fading, turning into stone.

"I never asked you to do that. I never asked you to do anything for me, Sage. You're the one who came looking for me." I pull the doorknob, only for her to shove her hands into the door, the slam echoing in the empty house.

My heartbeat thunders in my ears, and my skin crawls. I never asked her to send out fucking college applications. I never asked her to do anything, not to care about me or my goddamn future. I never asked for any of that.

She had no right to give me hope, to believe in a person who didn't want it.

I always knew I was leaving Ponderosa Springs when I graduated—that wasn't a question. I'd just never thought about what it was I would do outside of that.

But then she comes along, with plans, talking about opportunities in chemistry departments, ideas, poking around shit she has no goddamn

business being a part of.

She comes along trying to give me hope for a future that I know good and damn well will never happen for me.

This is why I avoided relationships at all costs. This is why I trusted the boys and only the boys. Because they understand how paralyzing false hope can be. They understand that good things aren't meant to happen to people like us.

"So I'm the bad guy? I'm the one in the wrong again? If I'm so fucking terrible, Rook, for not leaving Easton yet, then what about you? Have you even mentioned to your *best* friends that you're messing around with the mayor's daughter? Or are you still lying to them?"

Now I know she's upset, so she's hitting where it hurts. She's digging for something to make me react, and she knows exactly where to find it.

I shift, spinning so that we are facing each other, and step closer.

"I haven't told them because you're still fucking the enemy, Sage, and if they find out about us, if they find out that you still dating him pisses me off, they will kill him." My tone is bone-chilling, riddled with nothing but honesty. "Don't ever question my loyalty to my friends." I pause, grinding my teeth, my nostrils flaring with wrathful breaths.

If she thinks what her parents will do is awful, she has no idea what she's in for if the boys know.

They don't care about us fucking or whatever it is we are doing. They wouldn't care about who she is—unlike most people here.

"I haven't had sex with him since before Halloween, I told you that!"

"Yeah." I lick my bottom lip. "He still kiss your mouth?" I taunt, stepping closer while she steps back, a dance of sorts. "Touch your skin? Hold your goddamn hand like he owns you?"

Her ass hits the back of the couch, trapping her in front of me, nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

My mind is my worst enemy as it plays highlight reels of what I've had to endure these past two months. Watching them together in the halls, seeing him lay hands on her and knowing I can't rip them off.

"The guys don't care that you're the mayor's kid. Telling them isn't about that. It isn't about me. It's about protecting you," I emphasize, poking my finger into her chest, "from what they will do. They care about me. Even if I said it didn't bother me, even if I lied through my fucking teeth and told

them seeing him with you doesn't make me"—even saying the words makes the taste of blood bubble in my throat—"want to burn the entire damn school down after I'd ripped his hands off his body, they would still know, and the end result would not be good for you."

Through the darkest of shit, we'd seen each other through it. Saw each other battle things no person should ever have to see. Bore witness to what Hell on Earth really looks like.

We protect each other at all costs.

Nothing we wouldn't do for each other.

No length too far.

Including, but not limited to, skinning her preppy-ass boyfriend alive.

"So this is what it takes to get you to open up to me? Talking about how Easton makes you jealous? You do realize this is the first time you've even spoken to me about your friends."

I don't need this shit. To be poked and prodded by her so that she could try and understand me. I don't need to be understood. I don't need to be saved or fixed.

For the last time, I turn, wanting to leave. I'm done with this conversation, but she just won't give it up. She won't quit.

"I've told you everything! You know me, Rook, and I trusted you. You won't even tell me where you go when we aren't together! Why won't you do the same for me?"

"You should have thought of that when you started confessing sins to someone like me. I don't play fair, Sage. I told you that."

"No, you're not leaving," She steps in front of me, blocking the door with her body, one I would have no problem throwing out of my fucking way, but she knows that. "Not until you give me something. Why do you always show up with bruises? Why is your lip split?" She continues to push me.

My flesh and bone burn, this overwhelming fire building inside my chest, growing higher and higher the more she pushes.

"Move, Sage," I grit out through my locked jaw.

"No!"

I raise my palm, slamming it forward into the door behind her head so hard it shakes one of the picture frames loose, knocking it onto the floor.

“Stop trying to get inside me! You don’t belong there!” I yell, my chest stinging with the force.

Sage barely flinches, like she knows I won’t hurt her. Not physically anyway.

She trusts me. She isn’t afraid.

I think I’ve always known that she wasn’t afraid of me, and that was possibly what I found most interesting about her in the first place.

“You can trust me,” she says back to me with just as much passion, placing her hands on the sides of my face and forcing me to look into her eyes. How are they this pretty? They are begging me to give her something, anything. “You can trust me, Rook.” It’s gentler the second time, a girl trying to coax a wild animal from the corner without getting bitten.

No one, not a single soul, has done this to me before.

Forced me to open up.

The guys don’t need to ask, ’cause they understand it.

No one had done it before, because they didn’t care.

I’m sick thinking about my father, why I am the way I am.

“You’ve heard the rumors.” I bring my hands up, curling them around her wrists, pulling them away from my face. “You know why I’m bruised. You know why I’m bloody.”

Sadness builds in her eyes, tears lying on the surface of her irises. I can’t even bear to look at her when I’m talking.

“So your dad does hit you?”

“Hit, beat—he’s sometimes into whips on the weekends. Yes, Sage, my dad hits me. Big whoop. There are kids who are starving.” Classic Rook, make a joke of it. Make a joke so you can cope with what you’ve done to your own family.

What you could do to Sage if she gets too close.

“And the scars on your chest? That too?”

I nod, not wanting to say the words out loud.

“But, he, he’s always at Sunday mass, and he always seems so—”

“So what? Nice?” I raise my eyebrows. “A godly man whose wife tragically died? Sure he is, outside of the house. But inside, he makes me pay for being born. Masks are still masks, no matter how tightly glued on.”

Of all people, I would expect her to know that. No matter how much you know someone on the outside, you have no idea how twisted they can be

internally.

What a person is truly capable of.

And my father is capable of just about anything short of murder. I'm just patiently waiting for the day he gives in to that.

Ends the pain for both of us.

Tears finally fall down her face, wetting her dark eyelashes as she blinks.

I shake my head, tightening my grip on her wrists. "Don't feel sorry for me. I don't need it."

"Wh-why don't you tell someone," she whispers, frozen in front of me, desperately trying to grasp what makes a father hate his son this much.

And there it is, the question that unlocks the real truth.

Why don't I fight him back? Why don't I tell someone?

Anyone else would be scrambling to get away from a parent like Theodore Van Doren.

But they don't know him like I do. They don't know what I did to him.

"Because I deserve it." I drop my hands from her, staring down into her sad eyes. "I told you, I'm not a good person. My father used to be someone kind, someone nice. I made him into a monster, and I am facing the consequences of that. He is punishing me. Making me pay for what I've done. He's the only one who can do it."

I know she's confused. I know she doesn't grasp what I'm saying, not fully.

But it doesn't stop her from speaking on it.

"I can't believe you can't see what he's done to you. I can't believe you actually think he is justified in abusing you! No one deserves that, no matter what you did. There is more to your life than being a punching bag for your father. More to your life than being angry or the black stain on a town that doesn't take the time to understand you. You can have more." She pleads for me to see that, as if her soft words will cure years of abuse or conditioning.

I admire her for trying, because it's more than anyone else has done.

"You deserve more than that, Rook."

"I don't need more." I slip my hand on her cheek, cradling her head as I wipe tears with my thumb that don't need to fall for me. Knowing one day

she'll look back and see that those were wasted on a boy who didn't deserve them. "I did something terrible, something disgraceful, and there is no coming back from that. I'll never move past it. I am damned to lead a miserable life for my actions. I'm condemned. There are just some things that don't deserve forgiveness, Sage."

She'll never be able to get me to see it any differently. Because the only person who can forgive me is dead. I'll never find salvation until I'm six feet under.

"I don't believe that, Rook." She grabs for my shirt, pulling herself into my body, hugging me tightly. Trying to squeeze out all the suffering from me.

I gaze down at the top of her head, my heart doing this funny thing, beating faster but aching. Hurting. "I refuse to believe it. There is still good in you. I see it. I know it's there."

No one who knew me after the accident had ever said something like that to me. Shock waves go through me from the sentence, all of these feelings resurfacing. Things I'd buried.

There is still good in you.

Everyone else talked. They made rumors of my birth, calling me the Antichrist, a demon, the devil. They took what happened, a tragedy that lived inside my veins like poison, and made it worse.

They took a boy who already hated himself and made him hate the world.

I want to believe her, and maybe some part of me that was long buried did believe there is good in me.

That I could hope and dream. That maybe I could even have Sage permanently. That we would work out in the end.

But when you kill your own mother, all the good you are ever given dies with her.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

oh, how the fallen fall

sage

There's only one good thing you could count on West Trinity Falls for, and that is to throw legendary parties. The adjacent town, thirty minutes from Ponderosa Springs, is our biggest rival and our polar opposite, but they know how to have fun.

While we were raised on the thrones of wealthy families and years-old names that carried us through life, they fought for every ounce of money they had. They're our version of the wrong side of the tracks.

The Wastelands.

A place where good girls like me should never be spotted, but when you grow up rich, when you have everything, you are always seeking more, pushing the boundaries just a bit too far when it comes to drugs, partying, and drinking.

Coming here always ends in some disaster of a fight or police bust, but students keep coming. It's hard for kids looking for trouble to stay away from a place built on it.

House parties, drugs, and raves. If it was fun and illegal, West Trinity did it.

This is the last place on the face of the Earth I want to be tonight.

Watching my "boyfriend" tweak on coke while we're surrounded by his barbarian friends who are just as fucked-up. I'd been to one of these raves before, my sophomore year, and it smelled the same.

Weed, alcohol, and sex.

They're using a retired house of mirrors for the event, just as they had before. The main entrance is filled to the brim with bodies on a makeshift dance floor, while the halls are filled with mirror mazes. Finding your way to the bathroom while drunk is basically impossible.

My head is aching from the rainbow-colored lasers that strobe through the room, a thin veil of mist just above the moving bodies. House music and screams vibrate around, and to make matters worse, I'm stone-cold sober, much to Easton's distaste. He'd pulled me here so I could loosen up; he'd told me I had been too stressed lately and thought a rave party was just what I needed.

In short, he wanted me to be drunk so he could get laid, considering I hadn't touched him since before Halloween, and that was five months ago.

It's not like he isn't getting it elsewhere though. If he thinks I'm blind to his sleeping around with other girls behind my back, he is just as stupid as I always thought.

I fiddle with the glow-in-the-dark bracelets that stack up and down my arms, knowing that being left here long enough will mean my mind will start to drift away. Checking over to make sure Easton is occupied, I pull my phone out, my stomach flipping when I see the name across from the green message icon.

Morning Star.

Rook originally put "The Devil" in as his contact name, but I'd changed it later without him knowing.

Morning Star: Ready to ditch yet?

Me: Wish I could. Gotta stay until the end. He's already questioning where I'm always headed lately. Sneak me out later?

Morning Star: Already planned to.

I'm typing my response when he messages me again.

Morning Star: You better not smell like him.

I snort, rolling my eyes, knowing he'd probably smack my ass for doing so.

Me: How very primal of you.

I've never had a secret this big before. Yes, my past trauma is a hidden truth, but if people found out, the only person it would hurt is me. If someone found out about Rook, the downfall would be painful.

A part of me hates it, sneaking around, hiding away at the lake house. I want to go on real dates, to actual movie theatres, maybe grab dinner that isn't takeout. I want more to us than steamy kisses inside school broom closets. Yet, even as secretive and cryptic as we have to be to the outside world, this is the realest relationship I've ever had.

However, I can't deny how fun it is sneaking around. The stolen touches and heated glances. Everything is always so charged when we're around each other, even if we're an entire classroom apart.

"Baby, come dance with me," Easton coos, grabbing my waist. "You're going to have to work on those two left feet before our first dance anyway."

My eyebrows make a V as I shove my phone into my back pocket, looking around to make sure no one was close enough to hear him. I glare towards him, my eyes watching the way his pupils expand by the second.

"Will you keep it down? You told me you would wait to say anything, Easton."

He encircles my body, pulling me into his heavily cologned scent. I hadn't minded it before until I became fond of natural musk, of smoke and sweat.

"It doesn't even matter, Sage. There's two months until graduation. They'll be finding out soon anyways."

My stomach rolls, vomit begging to release from my throat.

My deadline is approaching faster than I can comprehend. I want more days with Rook, but at the same time, I wish everything would freeze just how it is. My selfishness is about to come to light.

My choice to lie to his face is not going to be taken lightly.

I'm terrified of what his face will look like. How it'll twist and contort with anger, with more hatred than any person has the right to have. There will be no explaining, no talking to him. He will throw me to the wolves.

The thought alone takes the breath out of my lungs.

I don't want to give him another reason to hate the world and the people in it.

"Don't wanna argue, babe. Come dance," he mutters in my ear, pressing his lips to my neck, making me recoil from him.

"I'm not in the mood. I'm just going to go sit down." My hands press into his chest, putting space between us even though his hands refuse to move from around my waist.

This all feels wrong.

He feels wrong.

Those baby blues everyone always compliments are so dark in this light, you'd think he was a different person. He stares down at me looking

just like his father, acting like him too.

“You want me to keep my mouth shut about the engagement? Then you’re going to dance with me.”

He has the upper hand against me now. He’ll always have the upper hand. This is only a peek at what our future would look like. Every single time I refuse to do something he wants, he would use his power against me.

Easton had finally moved into a place of power, somewhere I can’t reach him.

I let him pull me to the dance floor, and he pushes through people, pulling me into the pit. Once he finds the space he likes, he tugs me into his chest, my back plastered into his front.

Some house music playlist guides our bodies, mostly his, and I allow the movements of his hips to lull mine. I put in the least amount of work I can without pissing him off. I’m not sure if it’s the fog or if I really just feel like crying, but my eyes burn watching all the other couples barely able to keep their hands off each other.

“You will submit to me, Sage,” he whispers above the music, “I will break you until you’re the perfect domesticated wife who stands by me and follows my every step. Do you understand? You will submit.”

I try to block out his voice, inhaling through my nose and releasing it out of my mouth. I ignore him completely and force myself to go to a different place.

This would be my life, closing my eyes and remembering all the memories of Rook because that would be all I would have. Memories. I just hope these months I’ve spent with him would last me a lifetime of misery.

A song rings with familiarity in my ears.

My body runs cold with chills. A breath falls from my lips as I remember the last time I’d heard it.

It was something Rook had played over the speakers in the house while I was spread on the kitchen island, his hand buried between my naked thighs. Your mind can be a dangerous thing sometimes, and mine is no different.

The vision feels so real, I can feel him, his entire body practically absorbing my own.

When my eyes open as the beat drops, heavy and striking between my legs, I see a man a few feet away watching me.

His face is hidden from me by an LED mask that flashes with the strobe lights. The deep orange glow pierces through my soul, and the X's where the eyes should be seem to look right through me.

My chest expands with a gasp of shock, a zap of uneasiness falling down my spine, but it only stays for a second before it drifts away.

I think he's possibly looking at one of the other girls surrounding me, but his ridged form stays rooted in the sea of people, eyes locked on me and only me, unmoving from my stiff body.

He's covered by a black hoodie and dark jeans, and I can't see any distinct features from this distance. But this deep sensation vibrates inside my stomach, a sense of excitement washing over me.

Even if he isn't Rook, I could imagine he is. I could pretend so that being on this dance floor doesn't feel so awful.

Slow and teasingly, he tilts his head to the left just a bit, adjusting his line of vision to see me better through the crowd. But it's also like he's tempting me. Like I would lift his mask up and see his eyebrows lifted in a silent question.

“Are you going to dance for me?”

My body sways to the music, carried by the illusion that Rook is here with me. That he's both the man in front of me and the one behind me. I dance like a puppet on strings, some of my movements masked by the strobe lights. I dance like Rook is watching and he is my puppeteer.

Rolling my head in a small circle, I let my hair fall down in front of my shoulders, releasing a breath as my hands trace the outlines of my body. I look down at the white minidress, splattered with neon glow paint, swirls and patterns decorating my thighs and arms.

I snake back and forth, shifting my upper body just as much as I do my lower half. Hands grab at the front of my body, sinking into the soft flesh of my stomach. But these hands feel too needy. They aren't direct and precise, knowing where to go without needing a map.

Raising my head back up, I expect the masked man to still be there, but just like my vision inside my mind, he has disappeared.

My mouth suddenly becomes dry. The light, airy feeling I had is gone, and I'm back to feeling like a rock that is going to sink to the bottom of the ocean.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” I croak, shoving Easton’s hands off my body and disregarding his pleas for me to stay.

Bodies bump me from all directions, only making the urgency for water build. There are too many things happening, too many people, too many sounds. I feel like I might die of a heart attack right in the middle of this dance floor and no one would even notice it, all of them so consumed with their feelings of ecstasy.

I press into the door leading to the hallway, wheezing as I push through, feeling relief instantly. I can feel in the air that there are fewer people out here. It’s cooler on my skin, helping the sweat that rolled from my body.

Soft moans of pleasure find my ear, turning my attention to a few different couples layered down the hall, bodies pressed into the glass of the mirrors while they grip at their partner’s shoulders.

The neon LEDs that illuminate the mirrors only shine a light on the twisted faces of bliss they’re all experiencing. One couple has both their pants around their ankles, while the guy thrusts inside of her so hard I can see her thighs jiggle from down here.

I suddenly felt empty, needing something I know only one person could give me.

“Fuck!” Another man’s voice rumbles between the panels of mirrors. His breath appears hot and steamy in front of him as he slams his hand into the glass. With his other meaty palm, he winds his hand tighter in a girl’s hair, her mouth open as she sits on her knees gazing up at him. His breath appears hot and steamy in front of him.

It’s hard not to look, not to be curious.

I peer further down the hall, only to jump slightly when I see the man with the orange mask has returned, tall frame solid as he looks over at me.

We stand there, staring at one another while moans ricochet between our bodies.

There’s once again a sort of familiarity in him, but not enough for me to have an excuse for standing here listening to people fuck while we stare at each other.

The dance had been harmless, a figment of my imagination, I had thought. Until right now.

Until I watch his foot move forward. It sends me into reality, reminding me that I don't know that man, and who knows what he wants from me. There could be a million different things he could do, including turning me into a skin suit.

I spin, heading down the opposite way, walking faster than I should for not knowing which way I'm going.

My body collides with one of the mirrors harder than I'd like to admit. "Shit," I hiss, rubbing my shoulder that took most of the force. The reflection tells me that he is still following me, so I don't have much time to nurse my wounds.

I fight the rising panic, different from the drowning I feel normally. This is different altogether.

This feels like quicksand, enclosing around my feet, swarming like ants to food, sucking me down further into the plush, grainy earth.

That's what quicksand does—it eats people up. It gobblies them down, refusing to leave anything behind until you're trapped beneath the weight of sand turning into nothing but sediment.

I can see his body in every mirror. The dark mask with orange LEDs multiplies by what feels like hundreds, and his looming figure seems to block all of my escape routes. What's worse is while I'm practically jogging in heels, he's barely moving, as if he knows he doesn't need to try to catch me.

As if he's already caught me.

My throat tightens, fear crawling up with sharp claws.

Turning left, I hold my hand out, still moving quickly but making sure I don't crash into any more dead ends again. Dread twists in my gut as I navigate quicker, the sounds of his feet walking behind me echoing in my mind. I don't know where I'm going. I have no real plan.

So instead of continuing to panic, I decide to face it. I refuse to admit defeat to this fear, knowing that guys like him probably get off on freaking me out. I whirl around, cutting my gaze at the dude behind the mask.

"Dude, beat it. Following people is fucking cre—" I stop, noticing I'm speaking to myself because it would seem he has once again evaporated.

Had someone drugged me and I just hadn't been aware of it? Is this all just some LSD trip or a hallucination? Had there ever been a man in a mask?

I run a hand through my hair, laughing at myself as a way to cope with how fucking delusional I'm being.

"You've officially gone nuts." Talking to myself only adds to that fact. I rotate back to my original direction, my bladder squeezing tightly, nudging my memory as to where I was headed.

My blood freezes in my veins, all of my functioning organs seizing up when I feel the abrupt pressure over my mouth. The force behind the hand makes me whimper in pain. I'm almost too frightened to lift my eyes from the person's chest, but when I do, they widen with horror. My scalp prickles, and my bones rattle.

The orange mask glows into my soul, holding me there for only one still moment before heaving me backwards with an overly aggressive hold. My throat tries to become the home for my screams, but it's only a haunted house.

Vacant.

Discomfort pinches at my back as it comes into contact with something solid, both of our bodies breaking into an artificially lit room. My eyes scramble to take in my surroundings.

The aged white tiles on the floor, a wall of mirrors above the sinks, and rows of stalls to my right. Dying in a rave house bathroom is the last thing on my bucket list, and after the shock of the attack wears down, my adrenaline kicks in.

Swinging my leg up, I aim straight for his dick in hopes of catching him off guard long enough to scatter away, but he's smart. Like he knows what I'm going to do before I actually do it.

The hand not suffocating my mouth seizes my thigh, preventing my leg from making contact. With such effortless force, he shoves my leg back to the ground, lifting one finger.

He wiggles it back and forth, like the hands on the clock, insulting me without even using words.

Grabbing my forearm, he practically drags me towards one of the stalls. All the while I'm trying my hardest to fight him like a feral cat. My nails scratch into his chest and arms, but it only seems to make him tug harder.

My short physique is not equipped for this, for someone who can overpower me so easily. He's barely struggling as he pulls me into the

cramped space of the stall.

A barbed, stinging pain develops across my cheek as his large hands drive my front half into the door. I'm plastered against the ugly green wall, terror swelling around the confines of my heart, eating it alive just like the quicksand.

His body leans on mine, pressing into my back.

"I told you not to smell like him." His voice is molten hot as it pours from the holes in the mask. "Now you reek."

Relief floods my system; the familiar nature that I'd felt earlier hadn't been something I'd made up. I had known him. As if I could ever forget what he sounded or felt like.

However, even though I find comfort in knowing it's Rook and that I'm safe, I'm on the blunt end of his rage right now, and he's unpredictable when angry.

"Rook," I breathe. "What are you doing here?"

Instead of answering me, he just presses into me farther. "You made me watch him touch you."

"Made you? What are you—"

"You made me. You made it impossible to look anywhere but you. Existing effortlessly in a room full of fucking trash, looking every bit of holy, divine, and angelic, practically forcing me to corrupt you. You made me watch him grind against you, inhale you." A beastly rumble erupts from inside him as he breathes my scent in, feeling less man and more monster.

"I'm with you," I whisper, meaning it more than I've ever meant anything before. "I'm always with you. Even when I'm with him, I'm still with you."

"I can't not watch you, Sage. But I can't watch you with him anymore. I'll end up killing him, branding my name across your ass just before I slit his throat right in front of you. I'm sick of seeing him touch you."

The power in his hold rattles me to my core. There is so much severity in him right now that I know he isn't joking. I've asked him to do the one thing a man like him hates to do: share with a guy he hates, greedily hiding him in the shadows so that I could keep what we had just a little longer. I know it's wrong, but is it really that bad? Am I really the bad guy here for wanting to have one thing for myself?

I can't keep doing this to him. I can't keep lying.

But I don't want to lose him either.

So that leaves only one option.

The truth.

"Rook, I—"

Rambunctious laughter and voices burst into the bathroom, followed by the door exploding open. It dings against the wall behind it, but the group of men who just tumbled inside don't even care.

"East, that brunette little thing that's eyeing you out there is a solid fuck. Had her in between my sheets a few nights ago."

"I'll pass on your sloppy seconds, D. I'm capable of snagging my own pussy."

I'm thankful for the pressure Rook is putting on my back, or else my knees would've buckled. This is not how I wanted this conversation to go with him, and the last thing I want is Easton finding us and telling him before I can explain.

"It seems we have company, TG," Rooks mutters in my ear, the plastic of the mask biting into the flesh of my cheek. "How about you put on a show for them like you did me earlier, hmm?"

My body melts a little when I feel him grind into my backside, feeling his hardened length behind the fabric of our clothing. A gnawing in my stomach starts abruptly, resulting in a pulse beginning between my thighs.

My dress rides up some, enough to expose the back of my legs. I shiver at the scratchy feeling of his jeans rubbing against me. I bite down on my bottom lip as his hands fall to my lower half.

"I want you to make it up to me, Sage. I want you to be my pretty little whore and get down on your knees," he starts, building this fantasy for me to act out, one that has my nipples taut and core dripping. "And apologize for making me watch you and him. Make it up to me with your hot mouth."

The grip on my waist tightens as he spins me smoothly so that I'm facing him. Behind me, I can hear them all laughing about someone not doing a line of coke correctly. Panic comes back, but not out of fear of Easton's reaction of finding me—fear of losing Rook before I've gotten the chance to truly have him.

But Rook pulls me back into us, making everything else besides him disappear. He grabs my chin between his fingers, holding me there.

“On your knees, slut.” The mask makes it hard to see his expression, but his voice leaves no room for disagreement. I can practically see his eyes burning through the disguise. “And don’t get back up until I’m finished.”

I can’t tell him right now. I can’t break up with Easton right now either. But I can do this, and I want to make it up to him. I want to give him this.

So I do as I’m told.

I creep down in a squatting position, dropping to my knees one at a time, the cold tile stinging my skin. I keep my eyes up, staring at him through the mask because I know how much he loves it when I look at him while he fucks my mouth.

“Like this?” I ask innocently, licking my bottom lip, waiting for his answer as my palms run up his thighs.

My mouth waters eagerly. The challenge of making him feel good, the opportunity to receive his praise, makes my toes curl. I make quick work of his button and zipper, dipping my hand into his jeans.

Kneading his stiffened cock through his boxers, I tease both him and me. Touching it reminds me of what it feels like inside of me, stretching me out, massaging my walls until I’m left a puddle of bliss.

Chills rack my spine as I pull him free, and my body hums as I admire him. My tongue tests the waters, flicking against the vertical barbell jewelry that only adds to his sex appeal. The distinct veins swirling around his shaft throb as I take my time.

“Sage still not letting you smash?” I hear echoed outside.

“That uppity bitch has barely let me touch her.”

“Skank is probably screwing some other dude, man.”

Rook’s hand falls to my head, sneaking to the back of it to grab a chunk of my hair to hold on to. My skin is warm and tingling as I listen to them talk shit about me all the while I focus on pleasuring him.

Seductively and without moving my eyes from his glowing face, I spit onto the angry, red head, using my hand to smear my saliva up and down his length. I lube him all up so he slides down my throat smoothly.

“Maybe he’ll fuck the bitch out of her,” Easton jokes, making the guys around him cackle.

My scalp burns as Rook twists his wrist, pulling tighter on my locks.

“You going to fuck the bitch out of me?” I ask, my voice a whisper for only him to hear, eyes wide, trying to get him to focus on me so that he doesn’t kill the entire Ponderosa Springs’ offensive line.

I’m used to their crude comments; their words do nothing to me. My only focus is on making Rook feel good, showing him just how little I care for the man outside of this stall. How much I care for him.

Showing him how worthy he is of this.

I’m down on my knees where I could easily be caught, not caring as long as I get to make him feel good.

My palm curls around him at his base, pumping up and down while I open my mouth to take him inside. I engulf him fully, swirling my tongue, tracing the grooves.

He pulls me off him before I can do anything else, bending at the waist so his face is near my own,

“I don’t need it to go anywhere. I know how to handle the bitch in you.”

A blush heats my cheeks, just before I feel him press my head down towards his hips. He pushes his cock past my lips, into my mouth, and down my throat, catching me off guard completely. His piercings tickle the back of my throat, making me choke quietly, but it doesn’t seem to faze him because he holds me there.

With no mercy in sight, he shifts his hips back as he places his other hand in my hair, stroking forward once again, creating a sloppy sound as he crams his cock into my mouth.

His head is tucked into his chin, that neon from the mask illuminating our space. Even without seeing his eyes, I know they are staring straight through my own. My throat constricts around him, pushing him out with resistance, and my gag reflex kicks into high gear.

“Relax your throat, baby. Let me in.” He groans lowly, using both hands to shove me farther down his shaft until my nose is buried into his pelvis. The girth forces my throat to expand, painfully pressing against the soft tissue of my windpipe.

My breaths through my nose come out shaky as I wince, my eyes squinting as I focus on not making any noise so those outside of this stall don’t hear me. I swallow around him, suctioning him with my lips, creating an airtight vacuum.

“That’s it. Such a good slut for me.”

As difficult as it is, it feels so good. Feeling him stretch my mouth, feeling him rooted inside of me, watching him seek pleasure from me.

I’m so selfish, because I will take all of this. Everything he gives, I will take, take, take. Because it might be all I have in the end.

Every time I try to catch my breath, he steals it with another hard thrust into my mouth, and I have no choice but to take it. And it only gets worse as the seconds tick by. His hold on my hair burns with the force, and his strokes become violent.

I struggle to breathe, desperately trying to keep my gags quiet. Although there’s nothing I could do about his soft groans of pleasure and the wet noise of his cock filling my mouth.

Finally, fate decides to give me a break, because I hear the group of guys start to file out of the bathroom. When the door shuts, I choke embarrassingly loud, pressing my hands into Rook’s thighs and forcing him out so I can catch my breath.

A trail of spit from my mouth drips from his shaft, leaking down my chin and onto my chest. I can feel the heat from my flushed cheeks, my eyes rimmed with tears that freely fall from the force of his thrusts.

“Did I say we were done, Sage?” he taunts, pushing me backwards so that my head and his hands press into the stall door.

My reply is void. I’m unable to speak once he returns to my mouth, pushing deeper inside me than I thought possible. My head against the door gives him a backboard to drive into so that his thrusts are harder, and I have nowhere to pull back to.

I twist my head back and forth while his shaft chokes me, flattening my tongue so that it massages the underside of his length, lapping at the bulging vein every single time I force myself down.

It’s chaotic euphoria. The kind of painful ecstasy that makes you question your sanity.

My eyesight is blurred with LED lights from his face covering, hazy with tears as he continues to find pleasure. Fully ignoring the ache in my throat and jaw, my body begs me to take a break at the very least.

This is how it always happens with him. He pushes, pushes, pushes until I’m unable to function. There are no breaks. There is no easy with him.

He takes me to the complete verge of incomprehensible pleasure every time.

I want this.

I want to make him feel good so if we don't make it, maybe he'll think about this while he's in the shower, stroking his cock to the image of my face as he fucked my mouth in this bathroom stall.

I want this pain.

Knowing that in the days to come, I will remember it.

I'll think of the hurt, and my thighs will be slick with heat, because we remember the things that hurt us.

The number of grunts and moans pouring out of him is enough to keep me going through the ache. I gag and sputter around him, my throat tightening as I bring my hand up to rest on his abdomen. I can feel his stomach seizing, his vicious thrusts turning sloppy and out of control.

My other slippery hand cups his balls, eliciting a hiss from him as he sucks air in between his gnashing teeth.

"Fuck, baby."

With my name on his lips, he shoves deep into the back of my mouth, pouring his release into my throat. I swallow greedily, sucking until he's finished with me. I can feel his legs shaking slightly as he cradles the back of my head.

He pulls himself from me, allowing me to inhale deeply for the first time since this started. I rest my head against the door, my shoulders falling as I relax the muscles in my jaw.

I hear him lift the mask from his face, exposing those bright eyes, a thin layer of sweat on his forehead. He tosses it on the floor behind us, reaching down and scooping me up into his arms.

My body naturally winds around his, hugging him close to me while he pushes my back into the door, holding us there.

"Now when you leave, I want you to kiss Easton goodbye so he gets a nice taste of my come, then you're going to go home and wait for me to sneak up so that I can eat, yeah?"

Chills rush down my spine, cool heat tingling between my legs.

"I missed you too," I snicker, my voice raw and scratchy.

"I did miss you. It's just..." he whispers softly. "Can I keep you?"
And my soul breaks because of it.

I want him to keep me. Always. To stay here, right here in this disgusting rave house bathroom because it feels more safe, more right, than anywhere else I've ever been.

I didn't believe there was a soft side to someone like Rook prior to getting to know him. I always thought he was just burnt edges and scorching insults. Until I saw the person he was before this place turned him into something evil.

He's not evil.

He laughs and he smiles. He jokes and literally has a higher GPA than me. He hates the rain but loves the fog it leaves because it reminds him of smoke. He hates when I write on the inside of his cigarette packs, but I catch him smirking when he reads them.

He is a human who was hurt by the world. And all I want to do is be the reason he believes in it again. Even if I can't do the same for myself.

Even if we don't make it out together in the end, he needs to know that he deserves more than suffering.

He deserves happiness.

There's still something he's hiding from me, something in his past that makes him feel damned. I can feel it, that he still keeps pieces of himself in the shadows. It keeps him from fully giving in to me, but I don't care.

And maybe that's what's so scary about all of this.

That I don't care if I have his secrets.

I just want him. The him that makes me feel alive and real.

He pushes me to face life as I am and not as others want me to be.

When I'm with him, it's like knowing every day that tomorrow the birds will sing.

My fingers wrap around the strands of hair at the base of his neck, playing with them softly.

"You can keep me, Rook."

It's in this moment I realize I would do anything for him. So much so that I'm going to tell him about the arrangement, see if he can help me so that Rose won't be just as trapped. Anything he asks, I would do it.

I want him. I want to be with him and not just for another few weeks.

And that's the real power you could have over someone.

Easton has blackmail, which is something I could overcome in time. It isn't permanent or long-lasting.

But love—God, what a hold to have over someone. That is a true downfall.

It's why I stayed away from people for so long, why I was mean and bitter, keeping everyone at bay so they'd never get the chance to know me.

Because I gave the world a chance as a child, and it destroyed me.

I promised myself I wouldn't allow this to happen again. I wouldn't let myself get hurt, to trust someone the way I trust him.

I promised myself, and I have broken it, because now I think I've fallen in love with the devil.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

extraction

rook

“Where’s Thatcher?”

I walk up to the table tucked away in the corner of the cafeteria, glancing over at Rose, who is sitting down beside me.

“Sup, Rosie,” I say as I ruffle her hair.

She grins up at me, showing me her face. “Hey, RVD.”

The more my fingers and eyes discover her sister’s body, the more different they look from each other.

“Sick or some shit, holed up in his house. He’s pissed about it,” Alistair answers before chomping into an apple like it had talked shit to him earlier.

“He’s just having one of his germaphobe moments. He’ll get over it.” I pull my hood up on my head, sinking into the chair and tossing my feet up on the table, tucking my hands behind my neck.

“Speaking of where people have been, where the hell have you been lately? You weren’t at The Graveyard this weekend.”

I know that I’m going to have to tell them soon what I’ve been up to, why I haven’t been around as much, and I also know it’s going to need to be before graduation, which means telling them while she’s still dating Easton.

What a shitstorm that’s going to be.

However, I’m not going to announce it without Thatcher being around or at school. I’ll tell them when we’re alone; that way, if one of them blows up about it, it’s not a huge deal.

Like I’d told Sage, I’m not afraid of them finding out or their reactions.

Sure, they’re going to be fucking pissed at me for keeping it from them, but they’ll be even worse when they find out why.

“I was going, but then I smoked the wrong strain and passed the fuck out in my bed. Just wasn’t feeling it this weekend, dude.” Lies—I was fucking Rose’s sister in the back of her car outside of my house. “Don’t act like I never see you assholes. I practically live at Silas’s most of the time.”

“Better be glad my dad is immune to you wearing your boxers in the kitchen every morning,” Silas butts in, and I laugh.

“He only tolerates me because your kid brothers love me. Your mom on the other hand.” I suck my teeth. “She hates me.”

“My dad tolerates you because you’re my friend, and my mom doesn’t hate you. She hates cleaning up Nerf bullets around the house after you’ve gone to war with Levi and Caleb.”

I was admittedly jealous of Silas when we first met. I think that’s why when we connected, it made our bond that much closer. He had a great family, which seemed to be this uniting force between myself, Alistair, and Thatch. Could his life really be that bad? I mean, all things considered, he had everything—a loving father who wasn’t ashamed of his mental illness and would fight to give him whatever he needed just to make him happy, a mom who thought he walked on water, and two brothers that looked up to him. Not to mention they were loaded.

Where did he fit with us? How could he possibly relate to what we’d gone through?

I’d found out a few years later when he was diagnosed, officially, with schizophrenia.

It wasn’t that he understood; it was that we were the only people who understood him.

We knew what it was like to have demons eating at our lives, our hope, our flesh. We understood how real his hallucinations felt because we lived it. Even though his were fictional creatures that appeared in his mind and ours were humans wreaking havoc on our lives, we could still relate.

And that was something no one else could do.

Not doctors, not psychologists, not even his parents, who desperately tried.

I’ll never forget the day he told me about what it was like, how sometimes, especially at night, these intangible mist figures appeared. How they would tug at his feet and whisper in his ear. How no matter how many

times he would shut his eyes and tell himself it was just a dream, they'd still be there every single time he opened them.

There was no night-light or bedtime story that could keep his nightmares away. They were with him always.

That was the same time I told him the truth about my mom. He was the only one who knew about it or had even heard me speak about it out loud.

We were inseparable after that.

"I wonder if he knows he looks like a douche canoe or if he just doesn't care," Alistair announces, looking beyond me. Silas quirks a grin, just enough to change his features.

I turn my head to see behind me, greeted with the sight of Easton walking inside the cafeteria with his arm slung around Sage's shoulders, holding her as if he's meant to be there. As if it's his right to.

"Next time your dad pays his mom a visit, tell him to mention that Easton is too old for his mommy to be dressing him," Silas adds.

It's funny to me that Easton still has no idea that we're aware of his mother's extracurricular activities. I'm almost tempted to use it against him, just to watch him shake with fear of his perfect family reputation being destroyed.

Because if the truth came out, the Sinclairs would be the only ones who cared. As if Alistair gives a fuck what his piece-of-shit family did or who they fucked.

My molars grind together, jaw tightening to the point it's almost painful.

It doesn't matter how long we'd been together or how many times I've watched this exact scenario play out before, the sharp sting of annoyance never dims. Every time, my territorial hunger for Sage only grows stronger, and I had warned her I was done waiting.

I can feel my palms sweating as I look at her, that fake smile dazzling the room, forcing every male to stare and every girl to roll their eyes in jealousy. That plaid skirt number is doing wonders for my imagination.

A schoolgirl coming to confess some more sins, it would seem.

Rolling my tongue and biting harder on my match, I can practically taste her juices dripping into my mouth as I ate her beneath that flimsy material.

Wanting her sexually isn't abnormal for me. The protective need to keep her to myself is though.

I can't help but wonder if Easton knows her secrets. If she acts out plays in her underwear for him or eats Skittles until her stomach hurts around him. If he knows her dreams and the things that scare her.

Against my better judgment, I care about her. I want her.

And because life loves reminding me how vicious it can be when you're not paying attention, all of my worries are absolutely true.

Because as I continue my admiration of the girl I should never have trusted, I see her finger decorated with a shiny diamond ring that promised her forever.

"I wish she could see how much better she deserves, but talking to her about it is like talking to a hungry piranha. I just hate the fact he's going to be my brother, even if it is by marriage."

Rosie's voice is like white noise. It crackles and hisses inside my ear, millions of little needles poking my eardrum over and over again.

"Since when did they get engaged?" I ask, hoping my tone comes off flat and unbothered.

She shrugs, biting into a stick of celery. "My mom said way before Christmas. They'd just wanted to keep it low-key until graduation. Looks like they got tired of waiting."

I nod to her answer but also make a note to myself.

I'd been right all along. I should never have touched the pretty flower, never allowed her teeth to sink into the flesh of my forbidden fruit.

Everyone says the devil is the corrupt one; no one thinks it could have been Eve tempting trouble.

She had been pretty poison all along, and now I'm invested.

My mind is plagued with memories of her, of who I thought she was, my body infected with the feel of her.

She's in me, everywhere, and I want her the fuck out, right now.

All of her words, all of her actions, they had all been filthy, fucking lies. Every last one of them.

I'm sweating, fuming beneath my clothes, and the shaking in my hands is the worst it's ever been. I'm positive fumes could be seen radiating off me.

I'm spinning out of control, a downward spiral heading to nothing but a chaotic end, and I need to get out of here. I need to leave. I need to be punished for trusting someone I know is a liar.

"I forgot my chemistry paper at the house. Gonna run and grab it before next block. Catch up with you all later." I drop my feet to the ground, pushing away from the table I'd just sat down at only moments ago, and walk right out of there.

I'm going to leave—that's what I tell myself as my feet thud down the hallway. I need to be hit or I need to blow something up before I combust.

Except, as I walk past the theatre doors, I pause.

I know Sage comes here after lunch every day because of her free period. I'd sat in here many days watching her in the back row of the room without her knowing, just to see her in what I thought was her natural element.

I sat there like a fucking puppy. A fool. A fucking chump. Frothing at the mouth like she was some goddess or angel. I sat and watched, thinking of all the things I would do and say to her later. It was how I got through the day without gutting her boyfriend.

It held me off until I saw her again, because if I'm being truthful with myself, the only real place I'd felt anything close to happy was when I was near her. Not just comfort, like with the boys, but actual happiness.

A feeling I hadn't felt since my mom died.

Goddammit, how could I have done this to myself. How could I have even thought, for one split second, I was capable of being in love.

Even after what Rose said, even after the ring on her finger, this force inside of me keeps trying to defend her. It's lost on false hope, begging my brain to listen, to be optimistic. That maybe this is all some huge misunderstanding.

It wants to believe in her.

In whatever we were.

I shove the doors open to the theatre, cursing myself. "You pathetic fucking idiot." My hands pull at my hair, tugging at the strands painfully hard.

Even when I have no reason to believe her, I still wait. I lean against the wall in the darkness, and I continue being the guy who believes in her. I believe in the Sage I saw that night at The Graveyard.

There's no way she could fake the way her eyes cried out for help.

She could not have forged all those conversations, all those late-night rambles and laughs.

There's no way.

I stand here waiting as the minutes tick by, going to war with myself, never realizing until this very moment that I'd actually started hoping for something good for once.

Something that doesn't hurt.

Tricked into thinking I deserve more.

The door opens again, the sound of students outside canceled once it shuts behind her.

I'm not going to drag this out. I want answers.

I need the truth.

"I'll give it to you, Sage. You're a hell of an actress." I push off the wall, stepping closer to her. My body towers over hers even in those strappy heels.

"Rook—"

"Let's go back to pyro, yeah? Rook is for people who don't blatantly lie to my goddamn face." My internal war spews from my mouth, my words not even giving my mind a second to hear her out.

I stare down at those blue-flame-colored eyes and search for something, anything. A flicker of emotion that could kindle my hope so that it doesn't burn out.

Maybe anger because I'm doubting her. Sadness because she's in some sort of trouble.

I would have taken regret. I would have accepted her lying to me about Easton and regretting it because she had learned to care about me.

Instead, I'm met with nothing.

A passive face with an unreadable expression.

I look up at the ceiling, my chest expanding with a deep breath. "Just how long were you going to keep this up? Were you planning on keeping me around till just after the reception or when you had to figure out who the baby daddy was?"

She just stands there, looking at me with zero reaction. Normally, she'd yell back, fight back with me, because that was her. That was who she was with me.

I'm fueled with so much energy, my hands want to reach out and shake her. I want to scream at her to say something, to say anything.

"Tell me it's a lie, Sage," I say with a harsh tone, but my chest is aching.

She told me I could keep her. That she was mine to keep, and here I am doing the exact opposite.

I'd never been able to keep anything I cared about.

I just want this one godforsaken thing.

"Please fucking tell me the engagement is a hoax, that it's not true. That this is what your parents wanted for you. Tell me the truth, and I swear I'll shred the world in half to save you from it, to protect you." I keep going. "Tell me the you that clings to my hoodie when she sleeps is the real you. Tell me I got the real Sage."

Hoping this will be the straw to break her from her trance, I step forward, placing my hands on either side of her head.

"Just tell me it's a lie, baby," I whisper.

In three short movements, she obliterates all the trust I had for her. She steps back, out of my touch.

"This isn't how I wanted this to go, but I suppose it's best to rip this Band-Aid off." She tucks a piece of hair behind her ear casually, as if I'm not ready to explode. "I just, I needed a little..." She trails off as she thinks of the right word, looking rigid and calculated.

"Danger before graduation, ya know? You get that, right?" Her eyebrows lift at the rhetorical question, sounding more like a robot than a human. The attitude that soaks every single word rocks me.

The girl I had started letting in is gone. This is the old Sage, and she is back with even sharper claws.

The sad part is I don't think she ever went anywhere.

"I didn't really get the full wild high school experience everyone always talks about—trying to keep up images, cheer, school—and when Easton proposed..." She sighs, looking away from me for a moment as if she's picturing him, then returning her gaze to mine. "Well, I just wanted to check off all my life experience boxes, and you seemed like you would get the job done."

My chest constricts. A large knife had been dug into my back, filling my lungs with blood.

The only words I can manage through gritted teeth are “Is that right?”

She nods, showing her teeth with a condescending smile. “I’ll admit, I had my doubts when he popped the question.” As if to rub it in worse, as if to pour gasoline over my sliced wrists, she absentmindedly twirls the ring on her finger. “But! I think you made it more than obvious Easton Sinclair is everything I need for my future. I mean, we were practically made for each other. Don’t you think?”

Is she fucking serious right now?

I step closer to her, furrowing my eyebrows into an angry V.

“You’re joking. Your future is fake orgasms and people who treat you like a blow-up doll? That’s bullshit, Sage. This is bullshit. You mean to tell me that all the scripts, all the tears, LA, that was all, what? An act?” I’d never heard my voice so full of emotional intensity.

I could sound threatening. I could sound funny or sarcastic, sure. But this is different. Every word feels like razor blades against the soles of my feet, because she barely flinches at them.

As if they don’t bother her, as if she couldn’t care less.

“I told you what you needed to hear, Rook.” She adjusts the strap on her book bag, bored of this conversation apparently. “I gave you a girl you thought you could save. And you were just the pool boy I wanted some dirt on. I just—”

She stops, and fuck me if I thought she was going to crack and take it all back.

Her laughter resonates, biting into my skin like close-range bullets. One after the other, I take hit after hit until I look like Swiss cheese.

Left empty and full of holes all over again.

“I just can’t believe you actually fell for it.” She finishes her giggling, wiping tears of joy from underneath her eyes.

Fresh hatred pumps into my veins like adrenaline, an appetite for retaliation building. I thought my resentful spirit had dwindled since being around her, and this only throws meat at the starving beasts inside of me.

She’s a liar. A manipulative bitch. A traitor.

The enemy.

There’s no one I hate more than her right now, and I want her to pay. I want her to fucking hurt the way I’d allowed myself to get hurt.

I suck on my bottom lip, grinning from the animosity filling my body, overflowing in me. “Just know when you’re all alone at the end of this because you’ve used everyone around you that you did this to your fucking self. No one pities the bitch with no heart.”

She scoffs, turning away from me to head towards the stage. “I don’t need pity, pyro. Just like I don’t need this.”

“You’ve been playing this game so long, Sage, you don’t know if you’re playing it or it’s playing you,” I call to her only for her to glance over her shoulder and smile.

“Don’t be upset that you’re the one who ended up being played this time, Van Doren. I’m sure you’ll get over it. After all, tomorrow the birds will sing.”

I let her words soak into my skin. I let them feed my hatred for her, even if the only real person to blame is myself.

She’ll get what’s coming to her. I’ll make sure of that.

I tear out of the school, attempting to rip the doors off the hinges as I do. I know exactly what I’m going to do, but first, there’s something I need taken care of.

I go to the one person who would do as I asked without requiring answers.

Someone who craves the kind of demented torment I need in this moment.

Punches to the gut from Alistair and coarse Bible verses dipped in malice from my father aren’t going to curb my hankering for pain today. It won’t be enough.

I need some to extract this poison.

Now.

With my body shaking with so much self-hatred, I stumble up the stone steps to the front door. The gaunt knocker glares at me as I bang my fist on it, urgency in my movements.

My brain is shouting, screaming, and raging at the useless fucking organ in my chest.

It should have stayed dead. It should not have started beating again after everything it had been through. It knew better—it saw how the world was, and yet it expected Sage to be different.

For her to not be a liar.

It started pumping black sludge through the ducts when she dug her nails into me, the only liquid left filling my veins, fighting to work. It fought to believe it could once again beat normally, transport real blood instead of toxic fluid.

The heavy door groans as it opens, sunlight pouring into the darkened house. His black Oxfords click across the floor as he leans against the frame, looking at me with dull eyes.

He has a voice that's full of life, sarcastic wit, intelligent banter, and even some humor, yet his eyes let you know it's all an act.

Inside, he's twisted. He couldn't care less.

Not because he doesn't want to, but because he physically can't care about others. Not the way normal people do.

He's loyal, he understands me, but he doesn't care.

Human emotions are void to him.

While Silas comprehends emotions, how they work, how they affect others, he just doesn't enjoy them.

Thatcher could never grasp the concept of sentiments because he can't feel them for himself.

How could he?

However, Thatcher Pierson can do what no one else would for me.

I look at him, my fiery eyes meeting his icy ones.

"I need you to make it hurt."



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

exodus

sage

Stomach acid pours from my throat, splashing into the toilet beneath me. I grip onto whatever's beside me, trying to brace myself for the pain.

There's nothing left inside of me to vomit. Every time my chest heaves, my organs tighten and shift, expelling only a few puddles of greenish-yellow bile. I'd made myself comfortable on the floor of my bathroom, having left school and come directly here, wanting to avoid contact with all human life.

No amount of makeup or snarky bite could hide what was happening inside.

I'd used up all my energy keeping a straight face with Rook, keeping it all shoved down deep, and now it's forcing its way back up.

My body is punishing me for what I had done to him.

Another wave of nausea hits as warm tears streak down my face. All I can see are his eyes.

How they cracked and splintered open with so much pain and spite. I physically witnessed him torch every single positive feeling associated with me in his body.

All the good that I'd worked so hard to bring to the surface vanished with every single lie from my lips. With one conversation, I took what we had and buried it ten feet under.

It's dead now. I'm dead now.

Dead to him.

Left to rot with my own regret and the bugs, with no tombstone to mark my grave, because I know he'll never return. There's no need for him to know where I'm left to rest.

In that moment, I proved to him what he always believed to be true.

This life is not meant to hold anything but contempt and suffering for him.

“Is it done?”

I lift my heavy eyes to the door, barely glancing before trying to pretend he doesn’t exist. I’m hoping if I ignore Easton long enough, he’ll simply disappear from the face of the earth.

“Yes.” I cough. “You can get the hell out of my house now.”

His footsteps come closer before I feel his presence next to my hunched-over frame. Bravely, his fingers push a few strands of hair out of my face and over my shoulder. Not like it really matters now since there is already puke in them.

“Are you lying to me, Sage?” he purrs gently, voice soothing but his hand is the opposite. It greedily palms at the back of my head, clasping a fistful of hair, snapping my head back so I’m looking at him. “For your sake, you better not be lying to me.”

“Get your hands off me!” I shout, pushing my hands deep into his chest. He falls back from his squatting position straight to his ass, a weird grin on his face the whole time. “I told you I did it. It’s done, you smug bastard.”

“Tsk, tsk,” he clicks, shaking his head. “I had always found our relationship quite vanilla before. I think this is going to really spice things up for us in the future, babe.”

“You make me sick,” I spit at him, a look of disgust on my face.

A fresh wave of emotions bubbles inside of me, and I desperately want to curl into a ball on this floor and cry.

But I’m not giving Easton that. He’s getting ready to take everything I am; I won’t give him the pleasure of watching me break any more than I already have.

Had I really thought I could break away from all this? Leave and actually end up with Rook? Had I really allowed love to make me that naive all over again?

“You know what makes me sick?” He stands up from the floor and dusts his pants off. “Knowing you let that fucking lowlife touch you. It makes you look pathetic. You should be thankful that I’m still agreeing to this marriage with you. When I could just as easily take Ro—”

“Don’t you dare, you prick,” I warn him, matching his stance. It’s funny how even though he’s taller, his little-dick syndrome makes it feel like I’m talking down to him. “We had a deal, and I held up my end of it.”

A few days after the rave party, Easton had stolen my phone. Imagine me finding out the psycho had snuck into my house while I was sleeping to do it. According to him, he was being a considerate boyfriend and taking action.

It wasn’t hard for him to find the messages between me and Rook or figure out who they were from.

When he confronted me about it, I thought, *how perfect*. Isn’t that stupid? I thought this meant I could tell him to fuck off sooner than I’d expected. That Rook and I would be together publicly before graduation.

I ran before I could walk. I got overly excited about the time ahead instead of focusing on what stood in front of us.

They couldn’t force me or Rose to do this. It’s illegal, and we’re already eighteen. We could leave and never look back. Silas would do it for her in a heartbeat, and I’d placed my trust completely in Rook.

That he would be there. That when I told him, he’d refuse to let me. He’d fight for me.

Easton nods, rubbing his hand on his chin as he looks around. “I just have to know; did you really think you could get away with it? That I wouldn’t find out you were fucking him?”

“You found out ’cause you’re crazy and stole my phone.” I push past him, moving to my disaster of a room, searching through the floor of clothes for one thing in particular. “Don’t give yourself the credit of figuring it out on your own. You’re not that smart.”

I want to leave. I want this conversation to be over so I can pack a bag and head to the lake house. Stay there a few days and pretend everything is okay.

If I tried hard enough, I could close my eyes, sink deeper into his hoodie, and it would feel like he was there.

I just—I just.

I wish I knew the last time touching him was the last time.

That the Monday after the rave party when he’d shoved me inside the back of my car in the school parking lot was the last time I would feel him

against me. His hips between my legs, the smoke from his blunt, and our heavy breathing fogging up the windows.

I grab at my heart, fisting my hand in my shirt, trying to comfort the organ inside. The water had already been up to my chest, waiting hungrily for the dam to break so that it could sink me entirely. I'd been fighting all day, fighting to keep my head above the waves, but I'm so tired of fighting.

The pain of remembering was the dam, and it had just broken.

I can still feel his fingers running along my collarbone as his ear rested on my chest. His long hair tickled me, but I didn't mind. I liked it, how warm he felt pressed into me, even though he was all sticky from the sweat we'd both produced.

"What is this scar from?" His hazy tone rubbed against my skin like velvet, the pads of his fingers brushing the raised skin.

I told him the story of me falling off a merry-go-round as a kid and how after, my mom stopped letting me play on the playground. She was afraid I'd cause permanent damage to my face, and God forbid you look anything less than perfect.

"Rosie thinks it'll tell me who my soul mate is," I finished. "I think she just tells me that to make me feel better about it."

"Why does she think that?"

"Silas has a scar on his pinky finger in the exact same place her birthmark is. Soul marks. That's what she calls them." My hands raked through his hair, twirling a few pieces, and I pressed my nails into his scalp, knowing how much he loved it.

He moved suddenly, leaning back a bit so there was some space between us. With deliberate movements, he flipped the burning end of the blunt towards him, lifting it to my mouth so I could inhale.

I filled my lungs, and when I was finished, he drove the cherry into his skin. The sizzling of skin made my spine rattle. Even though I was high, I knew what he did was real.

Jesus, he didn't even flinch. He barely moved.

My eyes widened briefly. "What the fuck are you doing?" I cursed, snatching his wrist to tug the heat away from his body, in shock that one person could handle so much pain so abruptly. He didn't even think about it; he just did it.

A nasty, crimson burn was left behind, just above his collarbone. The angry mark was dusted with ashes from the smoke, and I knew it had to hurt, but he gave me no reaction.

He kept staring up at me, eyes blazing through the vapor.

“Proving Rose right.”

There is no number of deep breaths that would calm me. The water is rushing too high, too fast. I’m done for.

I frantically search for the hoodie, thinking that if I can just smell him, just a brief whiff, it might help the ache inside my chest. There’s the feeling of my skin splitting open, my nerve endings all exposed to the oxygen.

No one tells you how painful panic attacks can be.

I scratch at my neck, feeling how searing hot it is. My hand rolls across the scar on my neck, knowing I’ll never be able to look at it in the mirror the same again.

“Did you hear me?” Easton says with urgency, grabbing at my forearm only to have me try to jerk it from his grip.

“Stop touching me, Sinclair. I told you, I did what you asked. Now leave me alone.”

“Disrespect me all you’d like, Sage.” He tightens his grip, heaving me into his body, making my panic only increase. “In a few months, it won’t matter, because I’m going to own you. I’m going to turn you into a pretty little trophy, a submissive wife, and I don’t care if I have to break that bitchy mouth to do it.”

Saliva spews from his mouth, splattering across my face. I grind my teeth, glaring up at him and fighting against his hold, but he only squeezes me tighter.

A whimper tries to fall from my lips at the growing pain from the pressure.

“It’ll be a cold day in hell when you break me, but by all means, give it your best shot,” I grit out, struggling to keep my facade up with everything going on.

With my heart aching, my anger flaring, and the feeling of suffocation, I’m going to lose my mind.

“God help you if you didn’t break his heart, and I mean demolish it until there is nothing left.” Easton presses his forehead aggressively into mine, knocking our faces together harshly. “I will make sure my father takes

care of Rose. It would take nothing for him to pull a little string and poof.” He wiggles his fingers on his free hand. “She is gone. Wiped from existence, never to be heard of again.”

I swallow bile, knowing that’s the exact reason I even agreed to do this in the first place. I’m not sure if Easton is bluffing, but would I be willing to bet Rose’s life on it?

I can’t. Not when I know how much money Stephen Sinclair makes. Not when I know how powerful he is. I can’t risk it. I can’t risk her getting hurt or worse, dying because of me being selfish.

I’d been selfish my entire life.

It’s best for everyone involved if I just shut up and did as I’m told. Rook’s life would be easier, and Rose would be happy.

That’s what matters.

“You don’t have the balls,” I hiss.

“Try me, cunt.”

My palm snaps across his cheek without a second thought, so hard that it forces his head to turn in the opposite direction.

“It doesn’t matter what you do to me, Easton.” I laugh in his face, just as I did to Rook today, but this time, I mean it. I mean this bitter, sour laughter that pours from me like venom. “It doesn’t matter how much of daddy’s money you have or his control. You will *never* be Rook. You will never have me like he did. Not even close. So go ahead, break me, because I will slice your wrists open while you try.”

My chest heaves up and down, pulling in air and releasing it faster as the moments tick by. Easton’s changed—I’ve changed. Even though I always felt he had this darkness inside of him from the second we’d met, he had once been a decent human.

High school, expectations, his father. They turned him into something else entirely.

It did the exact same thing to me.

We are the same, Easton and I.

Scheming, fake, ego-filled humans with no regard for others.

Maybe it was fate that we had ended up here together.

I had expected it. Honestly, I did.

I had pushed him too far over the edge, but even still, I gulp when I watch him elevate his arm, ready to strike me.

My body tenses, stiffening up to prepare for the blow, but it doesn't come. Instead, I hear my door opening and my father's voice.

"Sage, where are the keys to your car—" He stops. "Am I interrupting something?"

Easton clears his throat, putting his arm down. "No, sir."

I retract from his space now that my father is here, wrapping my arms around myself.

"Why do you need my keys?"

He sighs, running a hand down his face. "I have to go to Portland, and your mother wants the car with her. Apparently, someone set the lake house on fire. The fire department is waiting for me to arrive so I can file a police report. Whoever did it obviously wanted us to know it wasn't an accident."

And it's then that everything really falls apart. When my entire soul obliterates onto the floor in front of me.

I let the tears fall freely. I let them run past my ducts and layer my cheeks with their warmth.

He couldn't even let me have this one thing.

I had broken him, so he took everything from me. He left me with nothing.

The lake house was mine before it was ours. If anyone deserved to burn it down, it should have been me.

I know I have no right to be upset. I said awful things to him; I said what I had to to get him to believe me so that he wouldn't try and come back.

But I thought...I thought I could keep the lake house. I could use it as a time capsule of us, going there when I needed to remember what it felt like to be with him.

And now I can't even do that.

I have nothing left.

The last of us had been torched inside that house.

I hate him for doing that, for taking what we were and making it cease to exist. Burning all the evidence, all the laughter, all the memories.

As if they had never even happened in the first place.

I hate him for this.

I hate him.

I fucking hate him.

But not nearly as much as he hates me.

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ACT II

the rise of a fire god

He doesn't just feel like fire.

He is fire.

He is the flame, the flint, the burn.

Like the Egyptian god Ra, he encompasses all that is warm.

He is my fire god, and I live to burn for him.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

white noise

sage

“Open.”

I drop my tongue out, showing the nurse the inside of my mouth, swiping my tongue from left to right, up and down. She shines the small pen light around, nodding once she is satisfied.

After three weeks inside of the Monarch Mental Health Institution, I stopped refusing the medication.

The side effects, loss of appetite, constant fatigue, migraines, they’re better than the alternative.

Everyone has this image of what they think a psychiatric ward looks like. Pop culture and movies have given a pretty damning image. The stigma surrounding these places is pretty horrid. I mean, everyone and their mother watched season two of *American Horror Story*.

I’m sure there are facilities that focus on helping patients, treating their issues and giving them hope for rehabilitation and an eventual release back into the real world.

But this is Ponderosa Springs.

And this is my life, and anytime fate can throw me to the wolves, it absolutely will.

This place is everything your craziest nightmares could conjure up.

A gated prison with padded rooms and no doorknobs.

They tell you when you get here, willingly or in my case unwilling, that everything they do is to help you.

That the straps that held me down on the stretcher when I arrived were to protect me. Their job is to keep me safe with their white lab coats and clipboards.

Even when you refuse to take your medication and they drag you to solitary confinement, where three men will hold you down and inject you with antipsychotics. Even when they keep you there for three days without a word.

They will sit you down on their plastic couches and tell you this asylum, this place, was built to help you. All of this is for your own good.

All the while they ask you over and over, and over and over again, why did you try to kill yourself? Do you feel like harming yourself now? Are you sure? Are you absolutely positive you're not having bad thoughts?

God help you if you say yes—even when I was first admitted, I knew better than to say yes to those questions.

Sadly, though, the doctors and nurses are right.

They are there to keep us safe and secure.

Not to actually treat us for our underlying mental health or do anything really that requires them to go out of their way to better our lives.

A crow soars across the morning sky, the grayish clouds tethering into its wings as it swoops close to the trees. My nose starts to run from the air that's nipping at my skin. January is always the coldest here.

Beyond the steel gates that keep the grounds secure, there is a river that you can see from the garden. Well, it's more dead weeds and broken fountains, but I'm sure at some point, there were flowers planted here somewhere.

“You have visitors waiting for you in the dining hall.” One of the nurses on day shift, Shonda I think her name is, stands above me where I sit on the moist ground.

The cold dew clings to my faded blue scrubs, but I enjoy the feeling. Inside, you don't feel anything. Not even temperature. Everything is middle ground and numbing.

For a few moments in the morning, I sit out here and actually feel like a human being. I listen to the crows squawk, the river rustle slowly, and the wind howl as it makes the trees groan.

Inside those walls, there are no bad days, no good days.

Just days.

Purposeless.

Time is irrelevant. It's either a blur or a racetrack. I never know when I'm sleeping or when I'm awake. The shitty thing is when I am awake, all I

wanna do is sleep.

If senior year me could see the person I am now, she'd fucking stroke out. Nails bitten to the quick, permanent purple bags beneath my eyes.

I'm no longer who I used to be, and honestly, I never found out who I wanted to be. So that leaves me cemented in limbo.

Lost.

Forgotten.

All sense of self has evaporated.

I've become this sort of hollow well. The only coins dropped inside are pills that echo within the walls of my core, reminding me that the only thing that fills me is emptiness.

"Visitors? For me?"

I'd been here for eight months. two-hundred and forty-three days. thirty-four weeks. and five thousand, eight hundred and forty hours.

There has never been a single soul come visit me.

Not my arranged ex-fiancé, my mannequin friends, my father sure as fuck hadn't walked through those doors, and my mom, well, last I knew she was states away engaged to someone with more money and a small life expectancy.

There's no one who cared enough to stop by and check on me. Once I was thrown into this place, they threw away the key.

After what I'd found out, because of what I know now, I had mentally prepared to spend the entirety of my life here. They won't let me out, and even if I do get out, they'll kill me before I had a chance to do anything with my life.

The sad truth is, I'm actually fine with it.

While I'm inside here, at least I can convince myself that Rose is alive.

Death had snuck into our lives and severed the bond between us.

One second I was a twin, and the next, I wasn't.

No one prepares you for that. For what it feels like when the other half of your soul dies. When the person you came into this world with leaves before you do.

It's hard to explain, but it's like there's a phone constantly ringing inside my chest with no one to pick up the other line.

All I have left is the guilt. It's what haunts me at night, keeping my insomnia working.

Incessant guilt for being alive while she rots in the ground.

I'm getting served cold oatmeal every morning, playing checkers with myself, while maggots consume whatever is left of her corpse.

"Sage, hello? Sage, are you feeling okay?" The nurse snaps her fingers in front of me. "I said yes, you have visitors. Your father and his friend. They brought you outside breakfast. You should be excited."

My father? And his friend?

It's almost a contradiction.

My father doesn't have friends, and he knows better than to visit me. Even if he wanted to, he knew I would stab him.

It was the last thing I promised him. The last thing I promised Rose even if she hadn't been alive to hear it.

If I was ever given the opportunity, I wouldn't hesitate to end his life, and it would be brutal.

I've had a long time to think about how I'd do it. Those thoughts are the only thing that bring me real joy.

Thinking about the way he'd look, begging for his life as I press a knife to his throat. I'd give anything to see the way the light in his eyes would drift away as my hands tighten around his throat.

There are millions of ways to do it and narrowing it down is practically impossible. None of them feel right—death feels like too much of a reward for what he did to Rosie.

Although our access to the internet here is restricted, we can read, and I'd done my best to use the facility library to find out what's the slowest way of killing someone. The most painful, the most graphic, the most aggressive.

No matter how dark or how twisted it got, none of it seemed to be the answer to what he had done. Even being eaten alive by dogs felt too humane.

"Are you sure it's my father and you haven't gotten it confused?"

"There is only one mayor of Ponderosa Springs, and his face is plastered on a billboard downtown. There is no getting it confused with your family. Shouldn't you be excited?"

To see the man who had my sister killed?

"Overjoyed," I say sarcastically.

She leads me back inside, and my washed-out blue scrubs rub against my thighs as we waltz down the dull hallway.

It always reeks of sterilizer out here, the pungent scents of alcohol wipes and latex gloves. It pisses me off that out of all things, that's the one thing I can't get used to.

The hall is loud today, sort of chaotic for a place that's meant to promote peace of mind.

Almost all of my fellow patients are more dangerous to themselves than to anyone else. This notion that mental illness is a warning sign of psychotic behavior was a myth debunked years ago. I read about it when I first got inside of here. I've read about a lot of things I never thought I would since leaving the outside world.

However, there are times when some tremors or hallucinations get out of hand. Usually always when one person is having a bad day, it triggers everyone around them.

I hear Hallmark Harry inside of his room, singing Humpty Dumpty repeatedly. He'd gotten his name for the same reason women cry on their couches during Christmas—he loves Hallmark movies.

One patient is banging on their door, demanding a shower; another is fighting a nurse about how the CIA is watching him through the radios, broken radios that don't even have antennae, mind you.

Reagan in 3B is quiet this morning, sleeping off the sedatives they'd filled her up with last night. Some people never learn, and she's one of them. She's been here longer than I have, but every single night, I can hear her screams.

Bloodcurdling.

They make my teeth ache.

I toss and turn in my sleepless state, covering my ears with the flimsy sheet while waiting for the night shift nurse to come on shift and knock her out with medication.

That's the worst side effect of the meds.

The insomnia.

The nightmares.

Lying awake hearing the cries, the screams, and knowing I don't belong here.

We make it into the dining hall, where the smell of cinnamon is pouring from the kitchen.

Circular tables, the grayscale decorations, and an older gentleman whose wheelchair is parked next to the only window.

His name is Eddison, and he has schizophrenia.

It had gone untreated until he was well into his thirties, and now they keep him so doped up, his brain can't even form complete sentences. There are rare times when he doesn't seem any different from me, but most of the time, he sits silent, trapped inside of his head.

Sometimes, I like to think it's better in there, that he's happy and not locked inside of a facility, but I know that's not the truth.

I've spoken to him once, and in that one conversation, I swore that I'd never say schizo ever again even if it was a joke.

"Pip."

Trauma stabs its claws into my heart.

With my routine panic attacks, it's a gradual plunge into different bodies of water. Sometimes it's a lake; other times it's the ocean. More often lately, it's inky black sludge that absorbs me, eating me up limb by limb until I disappear beneath.

This is anything but gradual.

I can feel his sticky hands on me, just before he shoves me completely under the surface. The abrupt water my lungs inhale catches me by surprise, so much so that my eyes start to water.

Sitting next to each other, across the room from me, are two of the men I hate most in this world.

Two faces I had never wanted to see again, two faces that I want to obliterate off the face of this fucking planet.

I'm angry that they're even able to breathe oxygen right now.

One of them stands, stepping a bit closer so that when he reaches his hand forward, his pointer finger with the class ring around it swirls a piece of my hair.

"What did you do to your hair, Pip?" His face is filled with sorrow, and I know it's because he actually cares about it. I remember just how much he used to like my hair.

"I stole a pair of bandage scissors from a med cart and hacked it off before the charge nurse sedated me," I say, staring vacantly. "And if you

don't remove your hand from me, I will bite your finger clean off.”

Cain McKay was what some might consider an honorable guy. Once a small-town officer for Ponderosa Springs, he'd worked his way up to the FBI. Everyone here could not have been prouder, yet the day he left for training had been like waking up from a three-year-long nightmare.

A lucid dream I had no control of. One I was fully aware I was stuck inside of and could do nothing to wake myself up.

“You've gotten bigger,” he breathes, making me feel slimy inside. Probably thinks I'm joking about ripping his finger off with my teeth. What he doesn't know is that wouldn't be the craziest shit I've seen around here. It would be another day at the Monarch psych ward.

I tongue the inside of my cheek, noticing that the years had started to age his face. Most women who don't know him would call him handsome in his button-down shirt, neatly knotted tie, and slacks.

Most women don't know he isn't into women at all or men.

He prefers little girls he has power over. Ones that wouldn't tell anyone, that couldn't.

Little girls that have everything to lose.

“From when I was thirteen?” I cross my arms in front of my chest, wanting to shield myself. I'd been too young to stand up to him before, too afraid, but now I have nothing to lose. “Yeah, that is about the time you stopped coming into my bedroom, wasn't it? I thought you'd just gotten bored, but it's because I hit puberty, isn't it?”

I watch the way his face changes, how only a moment ago he was composed and looked like a caring family member coming to see me. I watch as the filth and spiders that fester beneath his skin begin to sneak out.

The number of times I'd thought about the moment of pure joy that would run through me as he was publicly castrated was infinite.

The mask he wore was my least favorite.

One of the protectors, the guardian, the one who is supposed to keep you safe from the monster under the bed.

Yet, the only boogeyman I ever faced in life was him.

“That's how this is going to be? After everything I've done? You used to love me so much when you were little.”

I tilt my head. “Did you expect it to be any different?”

“Sage, can you sit down, please. Cain has driven a long way, and we have so much to talk about.”

My father speaks for the very first time since they arrived, ignoring my announcement of Cain’s sexual advances towards me. It doesn’t faze him though—why would it?

One, he probably already knew about it.

Two, he’d sold his daughter into sex slavery without even blinking.

Three, he doesn’t care.

He looks the same as the day I was taken away. Not an ounce of guilt or remorse has affected his ability to smile for the people of Ponderosa Springs.

I bet he even uses it to his advantage.

I bet the *woe is me* act is gaining him tons of sympathy. The man who’d lost his wife to an affair, the father who’d lost one daughter to death and the other to mental defect.

How fucking sad.

“I’m not sitting down.” I stare at him, really looking into his eyes so that he can see the reflection of what he has done. I want him to feel it, to see what his actions have caused. “What do you want?”

I’m not stupid—he didn’t come here to check on me or to see how I’m doing. He’s the reason I’m locked inside of here in the first place. The reason I’ll never get out.

Not because I’m sick or I need help either. He shoved me in here to keep me quiet so that I can’t tell anyone what I had found out.

What I know he did.

Frank Donahue had painted me as the crazy daughter who lost her mind after the accidental death of her twin sister.

Even if I’m let out, no one would believe a word I said, and that’s exactly how he wants it.

“Please.”

Chills decorate my spine, little bumps of irritation along my skin.

“Please?” I spit out at him. “I should kick you in the balls right now for even thinking you could say that word around me. Please? You don’t deserve to ask for anything.”

“You always did have a flair for the dramatics, even as a little girl,” Cain mutters as he waltzes past me, returning to his seat next to my sperm

donor. “Sit. It’s for your own good.”

One thing this place has taught me or, well, what I have learned is I really just don’t give a fuck anymore. I do not care about what people think of me, how others view me, or what is expected of me. I have no regard for anyone else but myself.

So, I don’t care to show my anger or my disgust when it comes to these two. There are no cameras to act for, and even if there were, I would do the same thing.

I slam my hands down onto the table, fuming beneath my cool exterior. I’m in shock at how entitled they truly are. The man who molested me as a child and the man who’d had my twin killed to pay off his debt—how could they think for a moment I would do anything for either of them? They have nothing to hold over my head, nothing to bribe me with.

My teeth start grinding together as I spit out, “Either tell me what it is you came here for, or I’m going to stab you both to death with a plastic spork.”

There is no bluff. No fabrication.

My dad looks at my extended arms. Self-consciously, I look down as well to make sure my horrible orange zip-up hoodie is covering them. Then I think, why should I have to hide the scars he caused?

Rosemary died on April twenty-ninth, and almost a month later, I was admitted to Monarch after having a “psychotic break.”

Everyone was told it was because of the loss of Rose and the abrupt divorce my parents were getting. It had been too much for an eighteen-year-old girl to handle, and the town thought I’d finally snapped.

What had actually gone down was something far more sinister. I’d gone innocently into my father’s office with the intention of printing a paper for school. Something I’d done a million times before, expecting the same blown-up image of our family portrait on the monitor.

But that time was different.

When I’d logged in to the computer, there was a video pulled up, already halfway played, and I remember thinking it looked like a Jason Statham movie.

My dad sat tied to a chair, hair disheveled and clothes filthy, while Greg West, a professor at Hollow Heights, interrogated him for money that

he owed his boss. Money that he'd borrowed from a sex ring, and now, they were short on product.

And when there was no chance of payment, he gave my father a choice.

"You die, or you sell one of your daughters as settlement."

I wanted to be surprised, but I hadn't been. I knew that my father was capable of corrupt things. Willing to do whatever he had to in order to keep up appearances. To stay on top.

With ease, he chose Rose.

Like she wasn't a human being, his own flesh and blood, as if she was just a name.

I wish he would've picked me.

My sister had been killed to settle my father's debt, and I'd never tasted anger so bitter in my mouth before.

Retaliation. Vengeance. The hunger to make him pay.

I would do anything to have it.

"We need a favor, Sage," Frank says gently as if soft-spoken words will make me forgive him.

I sneer. "Go fuck yourself."

"I wanted to be civil about this, Pip. Remember that." Cain calmly folds his hands together. "Your father is asking nicely. I'm not. You are going to cooperate with us, or I'll send you somewhere a lot worse than a mental institution."

Pip.

I hate that name.

"Like where, a sex trafficking ring?" I laugh, not needing to hide it from either of them that I know about it. "You know, I'm not even surprised that you're involved in this, Cain." I lean down closer to him, the smell of his aftershave making me nauseous. It's the same one that clung to my sheets at the lake house. "Do you buy little girls from them? Is there a video of you being blackmailed out there too? Is that how they have the big bad FBI agent in their pocket?"

Eyes like pits stare into my own, his jaw clenches, and his composure slowly melts away. "I never hurt you. I loved you, Sage."

"Is that what kind of sick lie you tell yourself? Is that how you're able to look at yourself in the mirror?"

My gut twists, entirely bewildered at how fucked in the head a person must be to justify what he did.

“Regardless of what happened in the past, you will help us, or you’ll be wishing you did. There are people out there who are capable of things a lot worse than I am, trust me.” His voice is scornful, something he probably uses on criminals on a day-to-day basis. He thinks he will be able to scare me into helping him.

“Leave.” I glare. “There is nothing I can do to help you and nothing you can say that will change my mi—”

“Rook Van Doren.”

A pen drops in the corner of the room.

And I choke on everything I wanted to say before this moment.

My agitation becomes fuel to his memory.

Being trapped inside padded walls with nothing from your past life means your mind is your best friend and, for me, my worst enemy.

I feel him like a third-degree burn all over. My skin blisters in remembrance. My charred bones rattle as they turn to ash all over again.

His name, a thought of his face, a nightmare, it shoves me into an incinerator every single time.

The worst part is he’s the only relief to the stinging.

The flame and the extinguisher.

“What would I know about a Hollow Boy?” My interest is piqued, but I keep that to myself.

“Easton was nice enough to let us know about your...relationship with him last year. We know you were involved.”

Fucking prick.

“Even if I was—” I shove my hands into the pocket of my jacket. “—I don’t see what it has to do with you two or your fucked-up lives.”

If they found out about Rook, I would have to play this smart. They can’t find out how much I cared about him. They would use him as leverage, and he’s the last bit they have.

He’s the last thing I have any regard for.

“Certain members of the Halo—”

“The Halo? You’re kidding, right? You named a sex trafficking organization the Halo?” Shock is on my face, but neither of them bats an eye.

All those girls missing, their lives ended for cash, and there is no one looking for them, while these assholes walk around calling it Halo as if it's just another business.

"The name is trivial, Sage. Members have gone missing. One of them has just turned up dead." He clears his throat, pushing a cream folder towards me to look at. "Greg West, his body completely dismembered and soaked in bleach, left at the same place your sister's body was found. Whoever did it is trying to send a message."

It takes me a few moments to really hear what he is trying to tell me.

I'm confused why this has something to do with me, why they are telling me this. A part of me is happy that he's dead—it's the least he deserves.

I open the folder, flinching a bit at the pictures. You think you're desensitized to enough things that death won't bother you until you see what certain people are capable of.

Greg's body is on the rotten wooden floor, perfectly laid out even though his limbs are not attached to his torso. Legs, arms, thighs, head, it's all sliced into sections.

I cringe at the eyes, how they are just empty sockets with dark red splotches, completely gouged from the sockets.

More than the gruesome state of the body, I notice how methodical it all is.

It's cut pristinely, not hacked off or chopped with an axe. They look almost surgical. And there isn't any blood; the body is almost white.

They took their time, and they knew what they were doing, minus the trauma to the eyes, which look to be done with aggression.

It's then all of it clicks together.

I shift my eyes to my father.

"They found out, didn't they?"

He doesn't say anything, only stares at me with eyes that are swelling up with fear. The wider they become, the more they resemble growing fruit that is ripe for the picking.

My tongue tingles with anticipation, my body unable to stop the grin that spreads across my lips.

I bet he's spent every second looking over his shoulder. Heart pounding, hands sweating with anticipation. The waiting is killing him,

constantly wondering when they are going to take their pound of flesh from his body.

Nothing is more enjoyable than watching a man who always thought of himself as a wolf become the scared, frightened lamb in the pasture.

Real wolves are coming for him now.

“Oh, you really are fucked,” I add, laughing almost joyfully.

“Yes, we believe your friends have found out about the organization, and that has posed a problem for us.” Cain looks like he wants to begin discussing the logistics of what he needs from me, but I don’t let him get that far.

“No.” I shake my head, chuckling. “They found out what you did to Rose. There is nothing I can do to help any of you now. Silas Hawthorne is not just some heartbroken boyfriend. He will slaughter anyone who had a fraction of involvement, and his friends will be right behind him.” I roll my tongue across my bottom lip, meeting my father’s gaze. “You killed the wrong twin, Dad.”

A flare of hope kindles in my stomach, knowing that even though I can’t do anything inside of this place, there’s someone out there getting justice for my sister.

Silas knew. He knew Rosie, and she wouldn’t have just overdosed, and now he could prove it.

“No one would have blinked if you’d picked me. Easton would have been married to Rose. You still would have got your money from the Sinclairs. Mom wouldn’t have left your sorry ass. You would never have been in this position had you just picked me,” I continue, the heat in my voice building.

Jealousy cures in the pit of my stomach, envious that I can’t help them give him his due.

That I can’t be the one that ends the man who’d given me life.

“Now you’ve got hounds from hell coming for your throat, Dad. And they aren’t going to stop, no matter what you do.” I look over at Cain, driving my point home. “Not until everyone who hurt Rose is dead.”

They both stare at me, one scared of the death he knows will be coming for him soon and the other warily, not knowing if my words are truthful or a bluff.

“Good luck,” I finish, stepping back from the table so I can ask my nurse to take me back to my room for the day. There is nothing else that needed to be said.

“Not so fast, Sage,” Cain speaks, “They won’t be killing anyone else. Because you’re going to help us put them behind bars.”

I shake my head. “Oh, you think?”

They must be fucking stupid to think I would help stop them. They’re doing the job I wish I was doing.

“If you want out of here, then you’re going to go back to Hollow Heights and work for us. You’re going get them to trust you and figure out their plan. You’ll be providing us the evidence we need to convict them, and then you’re done. You’re free to do whatever you want with your life. We can help each other here,” he offers, bribing me with freedom that I no longer want.

“I’m not helping you. I’ve accepted my fate of staying here.”

The pressure becomes too much. He stands abruptly, the chair squealing and nurses looking at him oddly. He tries to smile at them, but he’s too annoyed to do damage control.

He walks to me, wrapping his arms around my body and pulling me into his chest, a one-sided hug that makes me want to puke all over his shirt.

“Then we will pull you out, and I put you up for auction,” he grits out, tone low and dangerous. “Either way you will cooperate. Aid us in our investigation, or I’ll sell you dirt cheap to the ones who don’t care about what the girls look like. Ones that only care for the torture. The choice is yours.”

This could be it.

My path for avenging Rose.

All I have to do is act, pretend, fool them into believing I’m cooperating.

When in reality, I have the chance to work with four people just as resentful. I have the opportunity to help them, to help Rosie.

The only problem is...

“He’s not going to trust me. He is never going to trust me.”

“You’re a clever girl, Sage. Figure it out.”



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ten of swords

rook

Patience has never been my virtue.

I've never actively had a virtue, if I'm being honest. I relate more towards the opposing side that includes things such as lust, wrath, and pride.

Waiting is something I loathe. I'm an animal that works on instinct and adrenaline. Someone who doesn't pause to think about the action, just operates on the primal urge to destroy things.

However, my first semester at college has taught me less about chemical equations and more about when planning a string of murders and assaults, waiting is key.

Especially now.

We all knew once this started, there was no stopping until every single person who was involved in Rosie's death was bleeding out or ripped to pieces. We also knew the danger, the consequences that came with that.

The FBI has been sniffing around hard as of late, asking questions, gathering intel. They'd yet to interview or pull any of us in, but we aren't stupid. We know what this town thinks of us, and when asked the question, "*Who do you think is capable of murder?*" everyone's answer would be us. It's the reputation we've built up over the years that both helps and hurts us.

Even with the rise in police awareness, I still don't care.

For almost a year, I'd watched my best friend become more and more like a corpse. Silas was never super lively to begin with, but we all knew there was something inside, more to him than he let on.

Now, all of it is gone.

Wrenched straight from his soul and shredded in a blender.

I bite the inside of my raw cheek, trying not to remember what those first few months were like. The ones where he refused to leave his room and I spent days lying on the floor outside his door.

When I could hear his mother crying, terrified of losing her oldest son to suicide because the light inside of him had died.

I didn't even have time to mourn Rose.

Not in the way I wanted to.

I was so busy trying to keep Silas alive that I hadn't fully accepted the fact she was gone. That she had been taken from him, as well as me. From all of us.

There was no one else to call me RVD and no one's hair I could ruffle.

I lost a little sister and a brother the day she died.

Anger surges through me, even more than when this first started because I know who was involved, whose fault it was.

When Alistair told us what was on the tape he found with Briar, I wanted to act immediately. I wanted to fillet Greg West like a fish and turn him into dog food, then take a day to think up the most painful way to torture someone before testing out theories on Frank Donahue.

I'm haunted, forever, by the way he so easily chose Rose. How he so selfishly was able to choose between two human beings he'd created, ones he'd watched grow up.

Greg got what he deserved. He'd admitted to being the one who injected her with the drugs causing her allergic reaction. He'd been the one who caused her death, and we had handled it accordingly.

But Frank, he's still out there, breathing.

Walking around, smiling, acting like his actions didn't kill his daughter. He's the whole reason all these people have to die.

My hands start to twitch because of irrational temptations. If I'm not careful, I'd let my anger fester so much that I'd take Frank out myself, and I know I can't do that yet.

Like Alistair said, we need to be patient so we can stay safe.

There had been times I wanted to tell him to shove it up his controlling ass, just because I didn't care about my own safety. Prison doesn't scare me—what could they do to me that I hadn't already been through out here?

But the boys.

I don't want that for them.

So, I stay patient for them.

Always for them.

I lean forward, grabbing the hose that lies on the table and placing the tip inside my mouth.

I'm at Vervain, a hookah bar in West Trinity Falls that's just as sketchy as the town it sits in. There's no one who hates Ponderosa Springs more than Wasteland townies. Something we have in common.

I take a steady, long drag from the hookah, feeling the smoke rush my lungs. As I exhale, a dense cloud of smoke rolls from my lips, and I take another hit before setting the hose back down.

I would have preferred to be born on this side of the tracks to begin with.

Here it's eat or be eaten, packs of savage dogs fighting for scraps, bleeding for a chance at a better life. That's how character is built, how the weak are weeded out.

I was raised among the rich, where it was corrupt or be corrupted.

But Vervain, it's the embodiment of West Trinity.

It's dirty, gritty, and gives me a break from the headache of constant goddamn prestige. The blinding cleanliness and trendy aesthetics.

Music leaks from the old speakers, a combination of throw yourself off a cliff and rap.

Just what I like.

Through the haze of Fumari Ambrosia-scented smoke, I catch a glimpse of my waitress.

I lean back into the booth, sinking into the seat farther and resting my arms across the back. My half-lidded gaze follows her around as she buses tables and men twice her age stare at her ass.

Blood rushes south, and my jaw tightens.

Her face is hidden in the dark lighting, but occasionally, she steps into a stream of low light, exposing the color of her hair.

It's not natural—I know because it fades right before she gets it touched up, exposing her roots.

But tonight, it's freshly dyed the color of champagne and copper, strawberry blonde flames that cascade down her back, swaying as she walks

and swivels around.

There isn't a single feature I'd noticed about this girl. I don't think I've even read her name tag. I don't know her eye color or if she has missing teeth. None of that matters.

All I need is the hair.

My zipper imprints on my cock so aggressively that it's painful. It throbs, twisting my guts as it begs for release. My balls ache from the heaviness, my erection so hard it would make some men cry.

I haven't given myself the pleasure of release in months.

My cock hasn't been inside anyone's body or mouth. It had barely touched my own hand.

If my father did one thing in this life, it was instilling the need for repercussions.

Discipline.

Penalties for when you do things out of line.

He beats me and preaches scripture for what I did to my mother.

And I do this as a way to punish myself for Sage and what I let myself become with her. I had allowed myself to believe the world wasn't a cruel place, that it wasn't a fucking cesspool.

I deserve this for believing in her.

So, here, in the dark corner of this shady, smoke-filled bar, I watch this waitress with strawberry blonde hair and think about Sage.

The only place I allow myself to think about her.

The way she felt against my body, all small and warm. How my cock felt on the inside of her hollow cheeks and inside her tight walls. I thought about her smell on my clothes after, sugary like candy.

Sweet like syrup.

She always talked about how she felt like she was constantly drowning.

Now I'm the one shoving her beneath the surface of my memory.

I block it out when I'm around the guys, when we are planning homicide or sneaking around campus. I leave this form of torture for when I'm all alone.

I come here, knowing the redhead is going to be working, and I watch her from the shadows like some type of predator. I push myself to the brink of insanity till I'm so worked up I can barely breathe, and I sit there in that

suffering, until I think I've had enough. Until my body quits playing my sick mind games.

"You can't smoke weed in here," she says, her arms tucked behind her as she rocks back and forth uncomfortably like the last thing she wants to do is tell me what to do. She motions to the shisha that is normally just flavored tobacco, however, I'd packed mine with some devil's lettuce.

Apparently, they'd gotten tired of me breaking the rules and sent the lamb to the lion's den.

I incline forward, raising an eyebrow at her, offering a challenge.

"Mh, you going to stop me"—I drop my eyes to her chest—"Emma?"

My punishment is ruined now that I'm having to look at something other than her hair. Although her face is pretty, it's not what I need or what I want.

We make direct eye contact for maybe two seconds, and I think she might meet my confrontation. I wonder if she's going to call me out on staring at her constantly. If she's going to tell me that secretly she likes it.

Instead, she does what they all do. She backs down, looking away from me.

"I-I, um—I."

"Spit it out," I demand.

"I-I'm sorry. My boss hates the smell. I don't care, it's co-cool." She stutters over her words like the answer is the difference between life and death.

"Tell your boss if he has a problem, he can take it up with me next time, yeah?"

Standing up to my full height, I dig into my back pocket for my cash and toss a fifty on the table for her tip.

This is only a brutal reminder of how fucking empty and bored this last year has left me.

I can't keep anything. I can never keep or hold on to the people I care about, it seems. Every single time I let women inside, they either die or fuck me over. I'm never doing it ever again.

Rose being killed. The disaster with Sage. Killing those guys.

I don't know if it's only me, but the more blood we spill, the more hollow I feel. Not because I care, but because it still hasn't taken the sting of

losing Rose away.

Every time I look at Silas, it's another swift punch to the gut.

She's dead, and she isn't coming back, no matter how many throats we slash or bodies we cut up.

And I hate admitting how much that shit hurts.

She was too good for this world, too pure, and life swallowed her up with its nasty, rotting teeth.

I need stronger weed.

I need something else to get me out of my head.

To forget.

I move through the other tables and past the smoke, pushing out the front door only to be met with cold rain pelting down in heavy drops.

“Fucking fantastic,” I curse, knowing that the rain will feel like bullets on my body when I’m on the way home, even through my clothes.

Tossing my hood up onto my head, I start to jog across the street to where I parked. I step onto the sidewalk and look to my left for just a moment before I begin walking in the opposite direction.

My body collides with another, my attention pulled to the person I ran into because I wasn’t paying attention.

“Shit,” I grunt, looking down to see some of her things have fallen from her purse.

The weed makes me laugh a bit as I bend down to help her. I’m nice enough to be polite but still able to murder people.

How ironic.

My fingers reach to pick up a few random items—Chapstick, Advil, and a red-colored rock.

But she stops me, her wet brown boots clicking together as she raises her hand up to me, silently asking me to halt my actions.

“Just how far are you willing to travel into the dark before you see nothing good remains there?”

I recoil, eyebrows furrowed. “Huh?”

“The devil,” she says a little louder, scooping up three cards that had dropped from her belongings onto the wet concrete. “You’ve allowed the world to sit wickedness on your shoulders, honey, turning yourself into this image because it’s what they wanted, but is that what *you* really want? Is that who *you* are?”

She holds out a card decorated in gold and black, the center image depicting a man with horns atop a crumbling throne.

Confusion racks my stoned mind until my eyes spot the storefront she'd been walking out of. The neon sign reads Trinity Spiritually. Palm readings, tarot, spiritual needs.

I return my gaze back to her blonde, massively curled hair spilling from her beanie and her witty eyes that seem to know exactly how I'm going to react to what she has told me.

"I'm not paying for a psychic reading," I mutter, scooping up the rest of her belongings before stepping back, ready to leave her crazy ass alone.

"I can't help who the cards speak to or about. They aren't asking—they are warning you."

Do I have a sign on my forehead that says force your religion and spirituality?

"Well, you can tell them I'm not interested in anything they have to say. Maybe you should keep these things to yourself from now on, yeah?" I shouldn't be entertaining this. I don't want to be.

I stare down at her. The shawl wrapped tightly around her shoulders, she stands openly in the rain, unbothered by it.

"Stubborn boy." She arches her eyebrow. "I'm telling you the high priestess"—she taps the card in the middle—"is coming for you. You can only run so far before you run headfirst into your past. You'll have to face her, that pain, that heartache. Soon. Covering it up is only burying you further into your grave. Facing her can give you the redemption you need."

How the fuck did I end up here? Why the hell do I attract shit like this?

My stomach burns with irritation.

I hear enough about this stuff at home, just in a different format.

Spirituality, religion. It's all the same with their self-fulfilling prophecies. It's not used for good or to help people, just to control minds, to keep people in line.

It was created to scare people into following rules they wouldn't abide by if they weren't in fear of a big man in the sky.

She's coming for you? You're fucking joking me.

"I'm done with this." I turn away from her eyes, placing my hands on my bike and throwing my leg over the seat.

Apparently, she hasn't gotten the memo, because she follows, walking up next to me.

"I don't want your witchy bullshit. I'm not buying it," I say with a little more force so I can get my point across. I jerk my helmet over my head, messing with the straps.

"And I'm not selling it." In a calm movement, she reaches the last card towards me along with a business card, dropping both in my lap.

"Ten of swords, kid. If you don't rethink the path you're headed down, prepare for a painful ending. One full of loss, betrayal—it will be brutal and nasty. You won't make it out. Take these with caution, and if you ever heal from what religion did to you, come by and let me read your palm. I have a feeling you have a great story to tell."

Then she's gone, as if she didn't just drop some psychobabble horse shit on me, walking away through the rain, her boots clicking as she disappears.

I look down at my lap.

The one white rectangle has her name printed on it with a phone number.

Bliss St. James.

And the one next to it is the same pattern of black and gold as the other cards.

This one has a man face down in the earth, multiple swords piercing him in the back, driving him farther into the ground. His arms are outstretched as he reaches for help that doesn't seem to be coming.

The wind picks up, and the rain begins to fall harder. Chills roll up my arms at the bitter water that soaks through my clothes.

I quickly rationalize that the only way she knew about how I feel about religion was because of my body language. People like her are good at reading those kinds of things, picking up on the little things. It's how they successfully con clients.

Well, I'm not buying it.

I flick both cards onto the ground with zero regard, allowing the water to absorb them into a soggy mess.

I quickly turn the key over on my bike and let the engine rumble between my thighs. The power that surges through me as it hums warms my body.

I pull my helmet shield down over my face, darkening the area around me more.

Fuck divine intervention. I don't need redemption.

If God has a problem with me, he knows where to come looking for me.

Until then, I'm going to keep ripping heads off until all of Rose's wrongdoers are roasting alive in Hell.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

your past is calling

sage

Hollow Heights University.

They invite success.

The college of all colleges.

If you attend and graduate from here, there isn't a job out there you won't get. It doesn't matter if your competitors are valedictorian Harvard graduates, you'll get the position before they do every single time.

Because here, it's about legacy. It's about money.

Just getting in means you are worth more than most.

It's an infamous university that people dream of attending their entire lives and the one place I never wanted to end up.

I'd forgotten just how well it blurred the lines of distinguished and macabre.

The huge campus is a jumble of towers and buildings, all secluded and swarmed with dark green pines. The fog seems to be a member of the school, always hovering close by, lingering above.

It is odd wearing my regular clothes, ones that fit a little looser because of the weight I'd lost. However, almost naked wrapped in clothes that fit the image of a girl who used to be a queen bee and is now just a ghost story. They scratch my skin in weird places, feeling much different than the scrubs I had been required to wear before. My shoes click beneath me, hurting my ears as I wind down the halls searching for my first class.

My head spins at the high ceilings and gothic architecture, overlaid with swirl patterns framing dark stained-glass windows that shatter what little light crawled inside.

I hate being here.

But I'm not nervous.

I have a job to do. I have a plan, a role to act out.

It's not about the homework or getting an education; it's about fucking over idiots who let me out of my psych ward prison. I'm driven by the image of my father's death, watching all the life go out of his eyes while I stare him down into the grave.

It's the last thing I can do for Rose. The only good thing I can do for her, and it's the least she deserves.

After everything I'd put her through while she was alive, I can at least make sure her killer is brought to some form of justice. No matter how bloody.

Her death, that mental hospital, it changed me.

I used to look in the mirror and see a girl waiting to spread her wings. Waiting to live her truth.

Now I see nothing.

Just a shell of a person.

I have no idea who I am. What I enjoy, what makes me happy. I'm just breathing, moving through the phases of life like a small ripple in a pond. Insignificant.

My dreams had vanished so quickly that I had begun to wonder if they were even there in the first place.

I am lost, and I'd become content with that feeling.

"This is your first class for the day. If you need any help with scheduling or have an issue finding something, just stop by my office, okay?"

My school counselor, Conner Godfrey, is nice. I'd spent most of our time together ignoring him, but he's nice, nonetheless.

"Thank you." I give a small smile before he disappears down the hallways.

I look at the plaques next to each door, reading the room number and professor's name beneath them. Glancing down at my schedule, I take a breath and stop in front of lecture hall twenty-four.

Latin One is my first class of the day. Thankfully, I don't need to start in the first semester due to the college credits I'd acquired in high school. I could return to the spring semester of my freshman year along with all the other returning students.

The collared white blouse seems to tighten around my throat, and I'm regretting the decision to wear this black skirt already. The air feels too close to my naked thighs, and I feel too cold, even with the red blazer covering my shoulders.

I take a breath, a small one, just enough to prepare for the glances and stares I'll receive.

Sage Donahue is back, and if they thought I was bad before, they're in for a rude awakening.

Because now? I don't give a fuck.

I press the door open, my shoes filling the silence that has taken over the class. I can feel them all staring at me, most of them students I'd graduated with but some new faces in the crowd.

Those are the ones who whisper and ask questions, wondering what it is about me that had seemingly frozen an entire class.

Even the teacher, who is supposed to maintain professionalism, has paused from what she is doing to stare at me. I let them all openly gawk, letting them come to whatever conclusion they want, building stories in their head about where I'd been and what happened.

I can guarantee nothing their pea brains formulate would be worse than the truth.

"Miss Donahue." Our professor clears her throat. "Please take a seat, and refrain from being late next time as to not disturb our lesson."

This seems to bring everyone back to earth, reminding them of where we are and what it is they are doing.

They return to their conversations, and their eyes fall to their desks. I take this moment to scan the room for a seat, searching the rows of filled chairs for a single empty one. Preferably one secluded from the rest.

Instead, I'm met with eyes that are half-mast and blazing.

Ones that keep me up at night.

I knew I'd see him. I knew that my job was to put myself in his path, and I thought I would be ready for it.

I thought I had prepared myself for how he would look, to see what the past several months had done to him. I'd run through so many situations in my head, but there is nothing that could really prepare me for Rook.

There never had been.

Time had been good to him.

He was lean before, but now, now he's much bigger. His chest is broader, stretching the material of his black long sleeve. Arms that are covered tightly with material seem thicker, and he'd added hand tattoos to his list of self-decoration.

My chest spasms, looking at the way his hair flips out from beneath his backwards flat bill that only he can pull off. The light catches the small silver piercing through his eyebrow, creating a slit in the hair.

He is high—I can tell by how slow his eyes move over me. Not with interest or lust, but instead with disgust. Hatred.

Even the weed can't soften how he feels about me.

And that's what makes this hurt.

It's not seeing his face or that he'd changed.

It's seeing him stare at me with so much animosity that I can physically feel it touching my skin. I'm reliving that breakup all over again, going through the heartbreak of shattering his trust once more.

I know what he's thinking, how he wished he'd never met me, never allowed himself to do what we did. The pain that courses through me is almost unbearable because I know that as much as he hates me, he hates himself more for trusting me. And I never wanted that for him.

Subconsciously, I reach up to my collarbone, rubbing my scar that lies beneath my clothes. I'd done this so many times before for comfort, trying to see if I could conjure up good memories and feelings by touching the mark we now shared.

He watches me do this for a second, and it feels like a harsh slap to the face when he flicks his eyes back up.

They're alarmingly vacant, void of all feelings towards me. I can't even detect distaste or hatred inside of them anymore. He's lost all emotion in regard to me, and that hurts the most. Knowing that he feels absolutely nothing towards me.

The Rook I'd once known.

The one who'd so desperately wanted to keep me.

The boy I thought could love me...

Is gone.



It's amazing how things change while you're away.

How the world just continues spinning and moving even after people die or, in my case, are sent into exile.

Class this morning had been awkward for maybe ten minutes after I'd sat down, but Rook had quickly excused himself to the bathroom and never returned. Then I had proceeded to drown out the lecture, falling into a hole of plotting.

Trying to grasp how in the hell I'm going to get them on my side. How I'm going to get them to believe me when I tell them I'm on their side and want to be a part of their revenge. They're never going to let me help if they don't trust me. But I have to try.

My best bet, my only bet, is going to Silas.

If I could somehow talk to him long enough, I could explain to him that all I want is to ruin my father. To squish him beneath my feet until he no longer exists. To help end his life, and then I'll be out of their hair. I'll never bother any of them again.

He would understand more than any of the other boys how important this is to me.

I'd become the talk of the campus, just as I suspected I would, but while they're busy participating in the rumor mill, I'm listening for things.

Listening to all the things I'd missed when people thought they were merely whispering. It's amazing the shit people will say when you have headphones in, thinking you are listening to music when you're just waiting for them to talk.

I'd heard in one of my classes that Jason Ellis threw last year's homecoming party and got his black card taken because his house was fucked afterward. There had also been a gun that went off at the freshman-year orientation game, and hell had frozen over because it would seem one of the Hollow Boys was off the market.

Years ago, that last bit of information would have made me laugh. How could anyone want to date guys that psychotic? That fucking full of chaos and bad reputation. It wouldn't have made sense to me.

But now, it doesn't seem that hard to believe. If they're anything like Rook, they all have secrets underneath their exterior. Ones that once you see pieces of, once you understood even in the slightest bit, it's hard not to grow attached to them and to the darkness they carry.

The sad fact was I didn't even know all the things Rook kept inside. There were still traumas and secrets he'd hidden from me, and I still fell for him.

It's a scary thought, knowing that the only person in Ponderosa Springs who has dirt on me is Rook Van Doren, a notoriously vicious Hollow Boy. The information he holds would not only cripple me if anyone found out but break my heart all over again.

I tug my long overcoat farther around my shoulders as I speed walk across the grounds. January in Oregon means snow, and today is no exception. The white-covered campus is eerie even with the return of students from winter break.

The gargoyles that stare down at you, which some believe are actually cameras. The frozen water fountains in front of some of the halls. Snow covering the sharp tips of the towers, and harsh winds blowing across your skin from the sea breeze due to it being on the coast as you walk through open spaces.

I made it to the Salvatore Dining Hall just before my nipples froze off, pressing my hands into the doors and feeling the warmth from the heat inside brushing my cheeks. I cup my hands in front of my mouth, blowing into them as I move past a few other students I don't recognize.

I would think I'd be used to the over-the-top buildings and what they held inside, but each space I walked into at Hollow Heights reminds me of why it's so sought-after. The dining hall is huge, the ceilings incredibly tall with circular chandeliers with two tiers, each holding clear bulbs that almost look like candles. Rows and rows of horizontal tables six chairs long are squeezed inside the space.

Taking a second to stare at the ceiling that is similarly painted to the Sistine Chapel in honor of the historic building, I make my way through the line to grab food for lunch. I desperately try to blend in with everyone else,

something I would have never done before, but now it feels like I had to in order to survive.

I tuck my head down and tap my right ear so that my AirPods will play music in order to block the sounds of laughter and friends rejoicing. The Righteous Brothers play smoothly inside my head, warming what little bit of soul I have left.

Once I've gathered my food, I quickly find a table that is empty off in the corner away from prying eyes and make myself comfortable before I start to shove my food into different corners of my tray. I'd gotten so used to the dividers in the ward that the thought of my food touching makes me want to vomit.

I'd been away too long, so long that the ward felt more like home than this place. I just hope this wouldn't take very long so I can finally leave. I'm not sure where I would go, but I know I want out.

Before, I'd had dreams of Hollywood or Los Angeles, but when I think about going there now, I just feel empty. It doesn't feel right. Nothing feels right anymore.

“Sage?”

Fuck my life.

“I'd heard you were back, but I didn't actually buy it! I can't believe you're back! We missed you.”

I lift my eyes to Mary's, stabbing a grape with my fork simultaneously before pushing it into my mouth as I lean back in my chair. Lizzy stands next to her, waving awkwardly.

Mary's words don't match the look on her face. She is full of triumph as if she's won my spot on the Ponderosa Springs' throne, and to some degree, she definitely has.

“That's sweet.” I chew the fruit. “Same here. All I thought about while I was locked inside of a psych ward was my two very best friends.” I smile sweetly, blinking way too many times than necessary.

“I wanted to come to visit,” Liz starts, and Mary quickly bumps her with her hip as if I won't notice. Lizzy lets out a frustrated breath before continuing. “We wanted to visit, but your dad said it was best if we let you get better first.”

Lizzy, I believe would've been a good friend to me had I given her the chance, but as she followed me blindly, she is now under new management.

I scoff a little. “I’m sure he did. I’d say it worked, huh? Don’t I look better?” I ask, not really wanting an answer. “Besides, I’m sure you two were busy with graduation.”

“Listen, Sage,” Mary starts, flipping her perfectly curled hair over her shoulder, making me want to snatch that band off her head and beat her with it, “I wanted to talk to you about East. It was really hard after everything that happened, and we just kind of found solace in each other. We missed you. It was—”

This was the part I’d been most excited for—not having to cover how I really feel about things.

I interrupt her apology that I don’t need. “I don’t give a shit about you fucking my ex. I’m really happy you have my sloppy seconds, Mary. That way he will leave me the hell alone.”

I couldn’t care less about Easton Sinclair. I don’t care who he’s fucking as long as it isn’t me.

“I mean, that’s what you always wanted, wasn’t it? Why you were friends with me? So that you could have what I had?” I add.

I knew Mary was hungry for the attention I so effortlessly acquired in high school. Waiting for the moment I crashed and burned so she could step up and take my place.

And I don’t blame her.

This place raises you to be a vulture. You do what you have to do to survive, and it’s easier to get by when you live life at the top of the food chain.

“Don’t get your panties all tangled up because you’ve fallen from grace. Nobody wants to be around a girl who needs a straitjacket.”

“Oh, what will I do without the approval of washed-up townies.” I exaggerate by placing the back of my hand to my forehead as if to check my temperature. “I’m afraid I just won’t make it!”

I’m not sure what aggravates her more, my sarcasm or the fact I just don’t give a shit about what she says.

“You know, I feel sorry for you.” She gives me a toothless smile. “Lost your mind, lost your mom, lost your sister. That’s why you feel you can act so nasty towards me, because what else do you have to lose? You have nothing left.”

I grind my teeth so hard I can hear it. “You’re right. I don’t.”

She looks proud of herself, knocking me down a notch and showing me who's in charge here now.

"My dirty laundry is all aired out and hanging on the front porch. So that means you have nothing to use against me," I continue, licking my bottom lip as I tilt my head. "But yours, on the other hand, it's still hidden, and I know of it. I know every single scandal and secret both of you have. So, if you ever speak about my sister ever again, I'll do more than tell people. I will end you. Got it, girlie?" I finish charmingly.

My threat hangs in the air between us, both of them running through the list of dirt I have hanging above their heads. They know I'm not bluffing either—there's nothing stopping me from exposing them both.

Her eyes widen slightly just enough to let me know that what I've said has struck her.

They weren't on my list of things to deal with—I have more important things to handle—but if they get in my way, if Mary starts running her mouth about shit she doesn't understand, I will add them to the list.

Mary opens her mouth, ready to dig her grave even deeper, just continuing to shove her foot down her throat, but she is quickly interrupted.

"Everything okay over here?"

I look at the person the new voice has come from, and I realize that I don't recognize her or the girl who stands close beside her.

Lizzy tries to pull Mary away by her arm. "Come on, let's just go," she mutters.

But Mary isn't finished; she laughs sarcastically. "This is actually perfect. You're replacing us with the bug freak and the Hollow Boys' new whore. You should be careful, Briar—the last girl who was close to them ended up dead. Isn't that right, Sage?"

I press my hands into the table, my chair screeching as I stand up. "Bitch, I'm not telling you again. Keep my sister out of your mouth."

Never in my life had I been in a physical fight.

So I might get my ass handed to me.

I have no clue how to even punch someone without breaking my own hand in the process. But I know how to pull hair, how to bite, and how to play dirty.

"That's enough, guys. People are staring. We're leaving." Lizzy pulls harder on Mary, forcing her away from me and this heated situation.

They disappear to their side of the dining hall, and I'm left with this burning in my chest. This painful reminder that Rosie is gone, and everyone knows it. Everyone has accepted it except me.

I fall into the seat, dropping my head down and running my hands through my hair with aggravation.

What am I doing here?

I don't belong here anymore, and that is very clear. There's no way Silas or any of the other boys would hear me out long enough, let alone trust me.

My first day and this all feels pointless. It's only showing me that the entire world had moved on while I'm stuck treading water.

"Well, that was fun."

"Wonder when they're going to get the memo that mean girls went out of style ten years ago."

Briar—I think that's her name—sits down across from me, and her dark-headed friend sits down next to her, both setting their food down in front of them as if they were invited.

One looks like a female version of a lumberjack in her plaid button-up and gray beanie covering her dirty-blonde hair while the other is giving me serious Coraline vibes. I'm not sure when wearing rain boots and bucket hats was a thing, but she's killing it.

Both look like an odd pairing but so different in their own ways that they actually blend perfectly. They seem to balance each other out almost. The way good friends should.

I lift an eyebrow at them both. "Can I help you?" It comes off way harsher than I wanted, but a tiger can't always change its stripes, and I'm even warier about people than I ever was before.

"Oh sorry, I'm Briar." The lumberjack points at her chest. "The Hollow Boys' whore."

"And I'm Lyra, bug freak." Her kinky curls bounce a little as she talks, and it makes me look at her face a little closer than before, now that the drama has calmed down.

"Wait, I know you. You're Lyra Abbott, right? I think I had English with you junior year. You sat by the window?"

She nods. "You've actually had a lot of classes with me, but it's fine. I'm surprised you remember that one. I don't get noticed often."

The way she says it isn't sad; it's just a fact. One that she has accepted.

I keep my words to myself, because the truth is, the only reason I noticed her in that English class was that I'd found out about what happened to her mother when she was a child.

My attention averts to Briar. "And you? Dating Alistair Caldwell? Are you incredibly brave or just naive?"

She isn't from Ponderosa Springs. She's probably aware of his history with his friends, but she wasn't around while they were making it.

A part of her becomes defensive. I can see it in the way her shoulders tighten, and her jaw ticks a bit. The girl has fight, I can see it. She was unafraid to step in with Mary and Lizzy, their status not affecting her. And right now, she isn't going to back down from defending her relationship.

Was that what made the infamous wrathful Alistair Caldwell fall? Or is there more to it?

She clicks her tongue, nodding a bit. "I've heard that a few times since moving here. The answer is neither. I just happened to find myself in his path and never left. Sometimes, you don't know what you want until it's right in front of you. He's not like everyone says, not with me."

"Yeah, that's what—" I stop midsentence.

That's what Rose tried to tell me about Silas. What I had learned about Rook.

If anyone understands what it's like to fall for the things that linger in the dark, it's me.

I look at them again as they start to eat their food, wondering just how much Briar knows about what Alistair is up to. If Lyra is involved at all. I'm so out of the loop that I have no way of knowing.

"Listen, I'm not really looking to make friends," I say honestly, not needing to add friendship to my empty plate. I'd gotten used to how light it was without anything on it.

"We didn't ask if you were looking," Lyra speaks up. "You don't fit into the spaces of Ponderosa Springs anymore. You fell from their standards, and now you're one of the forgotten. But that doesn't mean you have to be alone. Loners need friends too."

She's right. I don't fit anymore, and a piece of me hates to hear it out loud. But the other part of me knows I never belonged in the first place.

“She gets deep sometimes. You get used to it.” Briar laughs. “But she’s right. You have no friends, and you could do worse than us. College is about meeting new people, making new bonds, right?”

“I—”

I don’t know how to be a friend.

That’s what I wanted to say.

I’m not sure how to be someone’s friend, not really. These two aren’t something superficial put in place to fit a certain image. They’re the kind of friends who share secrets and tears. I’ve never done that. I’ve never been that for someone, and I’m not sure I can.

But even if I can’t, this could help me.

They would be able to update me on everything that had changed. More importantly, Briar would be able to get me close enough to Alistair to talk to Silas.

And maybe, I don’t know, maybe I could—

No, Sage.

You have one goal, and building relationships is not it. You won’t even be here long enough to build trust with them. You’ll be gone and out of everyone’s hair as soon as your father is finished breathing. That’s it.

“I’m Sage. Sage Donahue,” I offer them, aware that they already know me, but I feel like I need to say it out loud for myself.

“Nice to meet you, officially,” Lyra says. “Welcome to the Loner Society, Sage.”



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

boiling point

rook

“Is there a reason you’re being extra moody today, Rook?”

The edge of the axe splits through the center of the wood, sending two separate pieces flying in opposite directions. Sweat trickles down my exposed back as I raise my eyes to Thatcher, who is sitting on his overly dressed ass.

I drop the weapon to the ground, rubbing my wet hands on my jeans to dry them off. I’d been working my ass off splitting wood for this fucking fire that we were going to have. Sitting around like everything is back to normal and everything is fine.

As if we’re back in high school doing this every single weekend just to pass the time as if our lives hadn’t drastically changed since then.

“I’m not moody,” I grunt, picking up the logs and tossing them in the pit. “I just need to blow off some steam. Waiting around and fiddling our thumbs is apparently only bothering me.”

“That’s not true, and you know it,” Alistair chimes in, standing up from his spot. “We want his head on a spike just as much as you do. Stop acting like we don’t.”

I run a hand through my damp hair, shaking my head in disagreement. “Then why haven’t we talked about it? Thought of a plan? Not one goddamn time since Thatcher cut Greg into tiny pieces. It’s been two months, and break is over with. Two fucking months, Alistair.”

My temper is boiling over its limit, reaching its capacity, and it’s ready to explode on the nearest target. There are too many things happening inside of me. Too many things that had sent me into a downward spiral of rage lately.

“Or have you been too busy with your head up Briar’s pussy to notice?”

Three seconds.

That’s all it takes before one of my best friends is in my face, his height just above mine probably making him feel superior, so close to each other that our chests bump at the force.

I’d crossed a line. I knew what I was doing when I said it, and this is exactly what I wanted. For him to do something, hit me in the gut or take a swing at my face. I want it. I need it right now.

“Watch your fucking mouth, Rook. I’m warning you.” He seethes, brown eyes turning an impossible shade of black. “I’m not rocking your shit because I know we are all on edge about this, and I’m betting a part of you wants me to. Don’t think you care more about getting justice for Rose than I do.”

I flex my jaw, placing my hands on his chest and shoving him back hard enough to jar him. “Stop trying to micromanage everything. I’m getting real sick and tired of taking orders from you, Caldwell.”

A tornado of emotions swirls inside of me, too many to control. I’m not good at this, at keeping everything at bay and under a lid. I’m a creature of explosion and low impulse. I can’t keep this up. It’s all becoming too fucking much.

“You sure it’s me you’re really pissed at here? Or are you tired of being your dad’s goddamn doormat?”

The dam inside of me breaks. It cracks straight down the middle, and all of my unchecked anger comes flowing out, ready to wreak havoc on everything in my way.

I charge him, wrapping my arms around his waist and burrowing my shoulder into his gut. A rush of air comes from his mouth as I piledrive him into the ground and send our bodies into the icy snow.

The cold bites into my naked skin as Alistair uses his weight to roll us. The healing cuts on my back sting with pain as he presses me into the ground. Our breaths are visible as we tumble with one another.

But he’s yet to lay a single punch on me, which only makes things worse. I want him to hurt me. I need it right now.

“Rook,” he grunts, but I just keep going, shoving at his body, my fist throwing the first solid punch into the side of his ribs.

I had failed my mother, and now I'm failing Rosie. I'm failing Silas.

Why can't I just help the ones I care about? Why can't I keep them?

Every day, Silas slips further and further away, and all I can do is watch. It doesn't matter how many times I tell him to take his meds, he still drifts from me, and it's fucking killing me.

They're all...

Leaving me.

"Rook!" This time it's louder, and using both his hands, he grabs a hold of my shoulders and picks me up off the snow before slamming me back down. My body jolts, bones rattling inside of me and my head bouncing off the hard ground.

"Ah," I cough as I feel my cuts start to break open, trickles of blood and melted snow sliding down my back. Those slices were made only a few days ago, and it'll only take them longer to heal now.

One large hand latches onto the back of my neck and tugs me forward. My head rams into his chest, and he holds me there. My body is rigid and tense. I fight against his hold, but he just tightens his grip.

"Goddammit!" I growl.

Before coming to the Peak, I'd stopped by the gas station to grab lighter fluid, and that monstrous asshole Frank Donahue had the balls to speak to me in line. Asking if college was going well, having the nerve to mutter Silas's name in regard to how he's doing.

All I could imagine was ripping his tongue straight from his mouth for even thinking of Silas or Rose. I'd never practiced self-control like that before, and it had been almost impossible to walk away without blowing up that gas station with him inside of it.

It had been the cherry on the shit cake.

I can't take this anymore.

I can't wait any longer.

"I get it. I know what you're feeling," he mutters. "I miss her too. I know it doesn't seem like we're doing anything and we're just letting that piece of shit walk around carefree, but we will have our time. His time will come, I promise you, Rook."

In the years I'd known Alistair, he'd never once broken a promise to me. Ever.

Even when I came to him and asked him to go hard on me in the ring when we were sparring. The first few times on the mats, I could tell he was taking it easy on me, and I didn't want that.

I didn't need that.

And he'd been the first one to notice that. The one who knew what I needed was pain and punishment in order to make it through the days. Especially now, it doesn't matter how many punches I take, there's no stopping the constant guilt that floods my system every moment I'm alive and she isn't.

Alistair always seems to know what everyone needs.

But what he doesn't know is on top of all this, someone who should have stayed fucking dead and buried has just been resurrected—walked straight into my Latin class with her strawberry hair and cinnamon-dusted freckles, looking ten pounds lighter and twenty times deadlier.

She has nothing here, so the question is why the fuck did she come back? I knew she'd been committed to Monarch Mental Health Institution—not that I cared, it's just what had made it through the grapevine. But if she'd been let out, why the hell did she come back here?

Isn't she supposed to be in LA by now?

Why the fuck couldn't she just stay gone?

"Do you two ever get along?" Thatcher interjects.

I place my hands on his chest, pressing into him, and he slips off my body. He extends his arm to me, and I take it, allowing him to help me up. We test each other often, more than the other guys.

Our emotions run too high, our blood too hot.

Silas and Thatcher can easily conceal their emotions. Hell, Thatch doesn't even feel them.

Alistair and I, we live in the anger. In the feeling. We use it for fuel.

"Not really, but it works," I say. "Sorry," I direct towards Ali.

He swings his open palm at me, knocking me in the head. "Don't ever say something like that about Briar again. She's actually starting to like you."

"As opposed to what? Me?"

We both look at Thatcher, who has the audacity to play dumb when he knows Briar Lowell can't fucking stand him, and for some reason, he has no problem making sure it continues that way.

I hear footsteps approaching from behind me, already aware of who it is before he appears in my peripheral vision.

Silas stands, staring at the chair to the east of the fire pit, the one where he used to sit with Rosemary on his lap. His hands are shoved in his pockets as he looks vacantly at the space. I would say that I'd give anything to know what he's thinking, but we all know.

It's always her.

"Hey, man," I call to him. "You been with your parents?"

It's then he turns his attention to us, pulling the hood from his head and exposing his buzzed head. "Yeah."

"Still trying to bribe you away from here?"

"Never stopped. Just gotten worse since Rose."

I know they love him, his father especially, but he doesn't need to leave. He doesn't even need support. He just needs them to understand he isn't going anywhere right now and accept that. The constant nagging about him going to a different state or school only makes it worse.

It only hurts him more. He knows that eventually, he'll have to leave Ponderosa Springs, but leaving feels like leaving her now. Considering he can't move her grave with him—trust me, he would try it—she'd be staying here while he was moving on.

That's the last thing he wants right now. He isn't ready for that.

No one is.

"Alright, Fire God, give us some light," Thatcher pushes, sitting back down now that tempers have settled.

I nod, taking a deep breath. I start walking towards the pile of wood that I'd stacked, using the lighter fluid and the match from my mouth to start the blaze. Watching the flames climb higher soothes the blisters inside of me even if it's just for a few seconds.

Tilting my head back, I let the fire heat my skin, inhaling the wood's thick smoke that rolls from the pit. Standing this close, I can feel the little embers crackling against it, little gasoline kisses against my chest that make my toes curl.

All four of us take our seats and stay there in silence.

We don't need to talk—we never really have. We don't show up here to chat about our days or talk hair salon gossip.

We come here to exist.

It's the only place in this town where we can just be. A small sliver of what the world outside of this place will be like. When we leave, people won't stop in the street to stare and whisper. Parents won't clutch their children's hands tighter when they see us. No one will care, because they don't know us.

To everyone else, we are just random guys living life.

Here, we are nothing but the bad apples they can blame their problems on.

And at the end of the day, all we really want is to exist in a world that doesn't paint us as villains.

Headlights scatter through the trees, casting a glow onto Thatcher, who sits in front of me. I turn in my chair as if I'm going to be able to see the person who is getting out of their vehicle and heading towards us in the dark.

"Did you invite the pet?" Thatcher asks Alistair.

"I told you if you kept calling her that I was going to crack your skull, Thatch. Knock it the fuck off," he grunts. "And no, she's with Lyra studying in her dorm tonight."

I stand up at this and face the woods where they will have to walk through, my mind heading into defense mode.

You don't just randomly stumble on this place. You would have to know it's here in order to find it. Which means whoever is headed in this direction knew we would be here.

We wait, my fist tightening in the silence. Only the crackling of the fire fills the air until we hear the crunching of snow, and soon our visitor is coming through the trees into the light and leaving the shadows.

"Well, I wasn't expecting that," Thatcher breathes, probably just as shocked as the rest of us.

Light red hair appears from the trees, her stylish bob swaying just beneath her chin. Her hands are shoved deep into her jacket pockets as she walks closer to the edge of the Peak where we all stand, almost too stunned to speak.

Soon that shock melts away, and I'm quickly heated with aggravation.

"How the fuck did you get here?"

Sage doesn't even flinch at Alistair's voice, just keeps her head up and continues her walk in our direction.

After everything she's gone through, the asylum still hadn't broken that fighting spirit. The one that refused to let her back down from anyone.

Good. I'm glad she still has her backbone.

It'll make it that more satisfying when I rip it straight out from her flesh, breaking that spirit once and for all. I'll crush her completely beneath my feet until she is nothing but dust that I can shove into the earth.

"I need to talk to Silas," she says simply.

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Your girlfriend, Briar, told me you guys were up here. She doesn't know I came though. That a good enough answer, Alistair?"

When no one replies to her, she turns to Silas, who is still sitting in his seat, looking over at her. His eyes are glassy, stuck in some sort of trance.

"I know what you guys are up to," she breathes, like it's a relief to finally say it out loud. "And I want to help."

I open my mouth to protest, spew some nasty comment about how she has no fucking clue what she is talking about, but I'm not fast enough.

"Not happening," Silas mutters with a tight shake of his head. "Leave, Sage."

"No." She stands tall. "I know about the sex ring. I know about what really happened to Rosemary, and I know you four are cutting up bodies in retaliation. I know what my father did, and I deserve to make him bleed for it."

My teeth grind until they are almost breaking apart.

"Pump the fucking brakes, Nancy Drew. You deserve it?" Alistair spits, a harsh scoff in his throat. "You treated Rose like shit when all she ever did was care about you. You don't deserve it just because you feel guilty."

"And you don't think that doesn't eat me alive?" Her head whips in his direction, eyes burning like those blue flames that had once scorched my skin. "Of course, I feel guilty, but that doesn't mean you knew my relationship with my sister. You have no idea how much I cared about her. She was my fucking twin."

"Sorry, you forgot to mention, how exactly do you know about all of this?" Thatcher's sharp eyes analyze her every move, just waiting for her to lie.

“I saw the tape,” she whispers. “It was on his computer for blackmail, I’m assuming. I accidentally saw it, and I-I—” Her voice stutters, as her fingers reach up to her collarbone, rubbing above the spot where her scar sits, in the same spot I have a scar of my own.

“You, you, what? I don’t have all day.”

“I threatened to tell the police, and the next day I was in restraints and headed to a psych ward. Frank is a coward, but he’s smart. He knew that if people thought I was crazy, even if I did get out, they’d never believe me.” Her eyes move back to Silas, and they soften as they plead with him.

“Please, I can help you. I can get you close to my father, and that’s what you need right now, right? A way that doesn’t raise flags to all the cops around here? I can help you guys if you’re willing to help me.”

I stand with my jaw taut.

I’d once fallen for that—another act, another mask she slid over herself in order to get what she wants from people. None of it is genuine. There is no real Sage, because she doesn’t even know who she is to begin with.

This is her trying to spin her web around Silas, around all of us, but I know better now, and no matter what Silas says to her, I’m not letting her close to the boys, to me, ever again.

“We don’t need your help, and you don’t need to be involved,” he answers, staring at her hard.

“But I—”

“I said no, Sage.”

“Why?” she yells, her stance steady, even though her eyes are wet, she is refusing to cry.

There is a pause before Silas stands up, glancing at the sky and back down.

“Because it’s not what Rose would have wanted.”

No one says anything else, and she is quickly realizing that she won’t change his mind. She shifts her attention to the other guys, pleading without saying the words, but all of them stand firm, not giving in to her wants.

Then, she looks at me for the first time.

Up to this point, she’d been completely avoiding me, for good reason. I’m the one that needs to be talking to her. I’d come off too harsh and way too abrupt, and the guys would have noticed something was up.

I kept what Sage did to me close to my chest. No one knew about it because I didn't want them to know I'd been played. That I'd been fucking betrayed.

"Rook?" she says gently, and my stomach turns.

Her mouth is slightly parted, and the wind catches her hair, and I swear for a second, I can smell her. She looks just like she did in the lake house.

Just a girl with dreams.

A girl with wings that this town had cut.

But I know what lies beneath.

How toxic and rotten she really is.

"Why are you still here? You're just embarrassing yourself." I try to keep my voice level, monotone, trying not to show any emotion.

Unlike her reaction to Silas, to Alistair, her armor cracks. I watch how my words break on her face and pain pours from the cracks. My words had done exactly what I had wanted them to—they hurt her.

I want a rush of excitement to hit me, adrenaline to pump through my veins. I want to feel good about retaliating, about giving her just a little bit of what she'd done to me.

I don't feel any of that.

I feel the same as I did watching that lake house burn.

Empty and so much fucking pain.

But fuck that.

Fuck her. I know she's got a hidden agenda—she always does—and I won't let her damage what we've worked for.

"Get the fuck out of here. Go back to wherever the hell you came from. You're not wanted here."



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

breathe

sage

I'd always enjoyed the snow.

It's cold but gentle, and people don't associate those things.

Things that are cold are never considered gentle. They're always seen as brutal and bitter, unlike the sun, which is always described as cheerful and radiant.

Cold things bite into your skin, sting with their low temperatures, and leave you feeling empty.

But I've always liked that.

I like the way the cold keeps everything frozen, leaving it a permanent memory.

When I was young, I would wake up before everyone else. Right before the sun rose above the clouds, I'd tiptoe into Rosemary's room, gently waking her up with a simple request: *Let's go outside and play in the snow.*

Secretly, I would sit by my windows waiting desperately for that first snowflake to flutter down and melt into the ground and I could run out of my family home and tumble into the cold. The raw feeling on my cheeks as the wind snipped it, the ache in my fingers as the chill soaked through my gloves. It was something I looked forward to every single year, or maybe it was because of Rose.

She always made things like that better, turning little moments into big memories.

The snow doesn't feel the same anymore.

I watch it pour from the sky onto my heated windshield and dissolve almost immediately. The glow of neon lights pierces through the white flakes pouring into my back window. In my rearview mirror, I can see Tilly's in all its winter wonderland glory.

It's February, and I guarantee they still have string lights up inside and Jingle Bells are still playing over the speakers. The owner believes Christmas runs from November first until customers start complaining about all the holly-jolly shit.

"Did you hear what I asked you, Pip?"

I nod, still staring at the diner in my mirror, feeling sick enough by being in the same car as this man. Looking at him might be the finger down my throat that triggers my gag reflex. The smell of his aftershave is sticking to my car; I'll have to spend hours cleaning that out of here.

"Yes. I just didn't feel the need to answer you. I told you already, I've only been here a month. I haven't seen or heard anything. Not a fucking peep." *Like I would tell you if I did, you fucking idiot.*

I want him to stop calling me Pip. I'd hated that fucking nickname the first time he'd ever spoken it out loud, disgustingly giving it to me because I was small. I hadn't seen him since I was thirteen, and now I've seen him twice in less than two months.

"Are you lying to me? There hasn't been anyone talking about seeing them around Greg West prior to his death? Or Chris Crawford, who is still missing? This is a very small, very tittle-tattle-filled town, Sage. I know, I grew up here too, and I just find it hard to believe—"

"There hasn't been anything, Cain. I'm not going to continue repeating myself. Either believe me or don't. It doesn't matter to me," I interrupt, needing this conversation to be over.

He'd texted me asking to meet here to check-in on my progress, and like I'd just told him, there hasn't been any.

After Silas sent me away like a dog with its tail tucked between its legs and Rook basically told me to go fuck myself, I hadn't got any further.

I wonder if his friends noticed how hostile he was with me. How harsh his words had been, like they were rooted into something deeper. It was the first flash of emotion he'd shown me since I'd been back. Those eyes burned and crackled. I'd awakened whatever feelings he had left for me, even if they were bad.

It felt just like the striking of a match. A small flame, but better than nothing.

I hate myself for clinging to his resentment. It makes me feel weak and pathetic, but I can't deny it—not to myself anyway—that I would take

his anger and his hatred over nothing at all. Because even that, just that, means I exist inside of him, even if it is just a little bit.

After that night, there hadn't been another opportunity to talk to any of them, not really.

Silas is always with one of the boys, and I know the other three aren't going to give me the time of day. Which also means being close with Lyra and Briar is pointless.

But I haven't stopped that relationship.

I'd started to enjoy their company. Even if Lyra is a little...odd. Lyra has a collection of insects, from butterflies to beetles. They are pinned inside glass cases that she displays on the wall, or inside clear domes on her shelves. There are pictures of grasshoppers and Praying Mantis scattered across desks. It's her hobby, and I respect it. But I won't lie, they kinda freak me out. However, I also have a better view of people after being inside that ward. Everyone has something that helps with coping with the damage they've been dealt.

Plus, I like that she's weird. She embraces how different she is. They both do, and sometimes I can't help but be jealous. When they sit and talk about the things they like, what they want in life, always turning to ask me the same questions, and I just sit there with empty thoughts.

What do I like? What do I want? Do I even remember what it feels like to enjoy things? To be passionate?

"I'll accept that answer this time, Sage. But next time, you better have something for me, you hear me? You are not in control here. I am."

I can feel him move, sensing when his hand approaches the side of my face. His fingers reach for a loose strand of my hair. "I hated to see you cut your hair. It was always so pretty when it was long."

I jerk away from him. "Get the fuck out of my car before I kill you." I still refuse to look over. "And stop calling me Pip or I'm going to rip your nuts off."

He laughs cruelly. "You're a gentle flower, Sage. A porcelain doll. You are all bark and no bite. You wouldn't be able to hurt a fly, no matter what you say."

This is where the conversation ends. He climbs out of my car, shutting the door and walking across the parking lot to his tinted vehicle.

It isn't until he pulls out of the parking lot that I release my breath. I press my hands into my scalp, digging my skull into the plush headrest, and I start to feel the icy tears stream down my face.

Every single time he leaves, I'm left shaking.

I'd never let him or anyone else see it, but he's right. I could snip at people, I could threaten them, but on the inside, I'm too soft. It's why I want to keep everyone as far away as possible—I know how easy it would be to hurt me.

Seeing him always takes me straight back to when I had nobody to help me. Back to lonely nights of staring at the door, hoping someone, anyone, would walk inside and stop him, only to be let down.

I'm left now trying desperately to pick up the tiny shards of myself, slicing my fingers wide open, getting the pieces stuck in my hands. There is no amount of glue or tape to put me back together anymore.

So I just gather it all in my hands and press the fragments into my chest. They might have been useless to anyone else, but I'm so desperate to cling to whatever is left of me, whatever remains of who I was, because without those broken splinters, I have nothing.

They say rock bottom is the best place to rebuild your foundation. Where do you rebuild when there is no rock bottom? When it's just constant falling, deeper into the never-ending oblivion, sinking for eternity into the boundless water.

What do you do then?

Thud. Thud.

I shift my head to look out my driver's-side window and see a fingerless gloved hand wave. I roll it down, letting a gust of frigid air steal my breath away.

"Happy Valentine's Day. Was that your Valentine?" Briar greets me with a small grin, wiggling her eyebrows, welcoming and kind. "If that's even a thing."

"Do you know Valentine's Day is actually a thing because of a Roman man named Valentine who thought it was unfair that the emperor banned marriage, so he started arranging marriages in secret, wedding lovers in the shadows until he was found out. So just before he was killed on, you guessed it, February fourteenth, he wrote one last letter to his lover and signed it 'from your Valentine,'" Lyra informs us, snow stuck in her wild hair. "So we

are basically all celebrating a man's death. It's like one big memorial. Kinda depressing when you think about it."

She rocks back and forth as we stare at her openly, pursing her lips before addressing it. "What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

I snicker as Briar starts to laugh. "I'm not sure where you keep all this stored. You're like an encyclopedia."

Shrugging, she replies, "I like to think of it as a filing cabinet and my brain just sends workers around grabbing the information I need."

"Of course you do," I say, smiling, "And no, he was nobody," I answer Briar's earlier question.

"Well, let me buy you a burger or..." She looks me up and down in the car. "Are you a salad type of person?"

"Valentine's Day for the girls!" Lyra throws her opinion in.

I fiddle with my fingers in my lap. Not because I want out of it, but because I actually want to say yes. I want to, and that makes me nervous. Wanting things. When you want things, you leave yourself vulnerable to being hurt when they are taken away.

Maybe it won't hurt too bad when I leave. It'd be okay to at least enjoy friendship before this is all over, wouldn't it?

"I eat burgers." I roll my window up, pulling the keys from the ignition and opening the door. "You're not spending this sappy day with Alistair? Which when I think about it, he doesn't seem like the roses-and-chocolate kind of guy."

Together we walk into Tilly's. Just as I suspected, Christmas is still in full effect inside. The warmth smacks me in the face, and Lyra moans from the heat, rubbing her hands together and searching for a booth.

"Alistair isn't big on holidays," Briar says, smirking a bit. "We play games instead."

I lift my eyebrows as we slide into our table. "Games?"

I love the way she doesn't even blush. She owns their relationship in every aspect. There is nothing to be shy about; she's proud of them. I want to ask if she knows just how dirty his hands are now. Does she know what he's been up to? What they all have been up to?

"Yup. Hide-and-seek this time. And he let me be the seeker this go around."

“How chivalrous of him.” Lyra rolls her eyes playfully, pushing Briar’s body with her elbow.

This fun movement draws my attention to Briar’s lower half, catching the dark ink marked on her middle finger. Alistair’s initials are carved boldly on her thin digit. The scar on my collarbone aches as I stare at it.

“So I’m assuming he’s already told you about the Gauntlet?” I ask, shrugging my jacket off my shoulders and laying it next to me. “You guys playing this year?”

“The what?”

I lift my gaze. “The Gauntlet? He never told you? It’s like the biggest game of the year. The Hollow Boys play every single year—wait, no, they *win* every year.”

When she still looks confused, I continue. “On the first day of spring, West Trinity Falls and Ponderosa Springs go to war. It’s been called the Gauntlet since I was a kid. Usually, high school and college students play ones who live for the rivalry that exists between us. Basically, if you’re hosting, you get to pick the location of the game, and if you’re not, you can pick the game. I think it was tag last year. Lyra, I can’t believe you didn’t mention it.”

She pulls her cap off, her hair flying in a million directions, the static out of control. “It’s been an...eventful year. It wasn’t on my list of priorities. Probably because I’ve never played.”

Eventful year.

I want her to elaborate, to see just how much Alistair trusts Briar—if they know about what happened to my sister, if they know about the murders and the missing girls. However, I know I can’t just ask them straight out, not without seeming suspicious.

“I’ve never played either. Only heard about it.”

“We should all play this year, then. It’ll be a first for each of us,” Briar says, grinning. “Does anyone know the game this year?”

“That’s the best part—no one knows until you show up the night of. We are hosting this year though. I’ve, uh, been gone a while, so I haven’t heard much about the location.”

“Lochlan Daniels. I heard him bragging in biology he got the keys to Roaring Spring from his dad. Well, stole them, but from what I heard, that’s

where it's happening," Lyra shares, always so good at picking up on the little things. Always listening, always observing.

"Let's do it, then. First day of spring, we take on the Gauntlet." Briar smirks, already excited for the challenge.

"You sure? I hear the people in the Wastelands play dirty. People end up in the hospital from injuries at these things."

She shrugs. "After this past year, I think we can handle just about anything."

Her eyes meet mine, and I know that when she said *we*, she meant all of us. They know about Rosemary dying and me being in a psych ward, even if that's all they know.

"I'm in," I say.

"You do realize if this game requires running, I'm screwed, right?" Lyra looks at us both, before sighing, "Fine, let's do it."

We celebrate her decision by ordering way too much food. I dip my fries in my milkshake, looking at the groups of teens inside this place. Months ago, I'd have been tucked in a booth with those who were most influential, the ones who made me look good, surrounded by conversations I had no interest in and friends that spent more time judging other people than actually bonding.

This feels so different. Better.

It's a genuine bond that's forming, and I'm afraid for myself, afraid of hurting them like I hurt Rook, of hurting myself.

Because I know what I'm capable of doing to people who get too close.

"So I told myself I wasn't going to ask, but I can't help it. It feels weird keeping it to myself when you're more involved than me or Lyra. You don't have to answer if you don't want, but..." Briar says, laying her burger down. "What happened on the cliff the other night with the guys? Alistair told me you showed up."

A beat of silence passes, and I look at both of them.

"You two know, don't you?"

Lyra chews the inside of her cheek, something I've noticed she does when she feels anxious or uncomfortable.

"Yeah. We know."

"How?"

“It was an accident. We were in the wrong place at the wrong time, or I guess depending on how you look at it, the right place. But once we saw what they had done, we were involved whether we liked it or not. It wasn’t pretty at the start. I thought—we thought—they were behind the girls going missing. That they were just going on a killing spree. I mean, who could blame us with their reputation?”

Tucking a piece of hair behind her ear, she continues. “But once we learned about your sister, what really happened to her, things changed. Feelings changed and—”

“And I had to participate in burning down a tree. So Briar is bound by love, and I’m bound by assisted arson,” Lyra butts in, plucking the cherry off my drink and popping it in her mouth.

Briar rolls her eyes. “It’s not always great. Especially because I have to put up with Thatcher, but we are in it now. There is no going back, and it’s been hard not saying this to you, but we are here. I’m sure it’s been lonely, Sage. Holding all that in, knowing all of those things, and having no one to tell them to. It felt wrong not telling you.”

And for the first time since returning, I feel like I can breathe. It’s not a lot, a little gasp of air, but it’s enough. Enough to remind me that the surface is just beyond my reach, and if I tried, if I swam hard enough, I could beat it.

This feeling of being understood, of having people around me that not only know about my situation but in some ways could relate to it,

I’d never experienced this outside of Rosemary and Rook. They’d been the people who’d connected to the real me. Whoever that person was, they had attached themselves to her, and now these two girls are tangling with the person I am now.

“Thank you,” I mutter, my voice raw. “I went to the cliff to ask them if I could help them somehow. I mean, it’s my father who did this to us. To Rose, Silas, me. I wanted in. I wanted to make him pay for what he did.”

I keep the information about Cain and my father to myself, just for a little longer. I don’t want them to worry, and I have it under control for now. It’s best if both sides stay unaware of what the other is doing. Plus, it won’t matter because there is no way the guys—Rook—are going to let me be a part of it.

They don’t trust me.

He doesn't trust me.

"But Silas said no, and the boys have his back. There isn't any swaying their opinion. He says it's because Rosemary wouldn't have wanted me involved, but I know it's because they don't trust me, and I don't blame them."

"I know you probably don't believe this, but maybe it's for the best. This could be your time to heal, and I realize I don't know you that well, but you don't want murder on your conscience," Briar says.

"I'm not going to heal. It's an open wound forever, but I will be able to move forward, once my father is dead," I say honestly.

The air they had given me had tasted nice to my tired lungs, but nothing would feel better than knowing Frank Donahue was six feet beneath the ground.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

self-inflicted wounds

rook

I was baptized in gasoline as a child.

Born to ignite. Born to live and go down in flames.

Raised in the house of the Lord but christened by a touch of rebellion.

The rumor of my lineage, of me being the offspring of the Ruler of Hell, came after one random day in Sunday school. I was old enough to understand but too young to grasp what the rumors would do to my life.

We had been asked to share something with the class—an interesting fact, a cool talent, a strange food combination we enjoyed. A snippet of ourselves so that our peers could get to know us better and we could make friends.

There was a kid who had a pet fish named Flipper with one fin. A boy who was color-blind and a girl who liked eating peanut butter and mayonnaise sandwiches, which I think was more blasphemous than anything I'd said.

When my turn came around, I stood up and lifted my shirt, exposing the side of my lower back where my birthmark was. It's smaller now, but on my tiny body, it was pretty big. The coloration created this X shape or what I thought was that shape.

To me it was pretty cool, like X marks the spot, ya know? And as a kid who loved *Pirates of the Caribbean*, I thought this fun fact would be neat to share with my classmates.

But they didn't see it as the marker of buried treasure or even the twenty-fourth letter of the alphabet.

They saw it as an upside-down cross.

The Antichrist.

The mark of the beast.

Our Sunday school teacher tried to hush the whispers of children and the jokes they made, but the damage had been done. After that lesson, those kids ran to their parents and told them all about my birthmark.

It grew, grew, grew, until it became the monster it is today. Until I became the monster I am today.

From a simple coloration of the skin to my mother had prayed to the wrong deity. They talked about it like it was some lore or scary story around a campfire.

So when I gave in to chaos and became exactly what they wanted, they all acted as if they saw it coming. I was marked by the devil; it only made sense that I acted like him.

Like my friends, there came a point in my life where I gave up trying to be anything other than their rumors. I gave in to the reputation and turned into something much worse than they could have imagined.

I didn't just become the son of the devil. No, I refused to bow beneath anyone's feet. Not anymore.

They wanted this, right? They wanted to tear down what was left of a hopeless boy and make him into a monster they could hate.

They wanted evil, so I became the king of it.

The ruler of it all.

I'd become Lucifer himself.

I rained hellfire down and lived in sin.

"Change the fucking music, bro. This is worse than Alistair's screamo," I complain, squeezing the front of the wooden chair I'm straddling. My short nails dig into the material.

Thatcher increases the pressure on my back. He strokes with harsh slashes. The fierce pain makes my teeth throb. It's keen, and I can feel my skin opening, the blood streaking down. It's weird how warm it feels.

"My basement. My rules. My music," he states.

I breathe through my nose, closing my eyes. The rush of ecstasy from the torture inflicted makes me shake with satisfaction, finally reaching the terminal high of punishment.

Every single new cut is a payment. Restitution pours out of the torn skin in the form of blood. All the pent-up regret and blame falls out of me. The stress of my life, the guilt, my failures, Sage. It cascades down my spine and leaves my body.

I'd thought about doing this to myself for years.

Cutting. Self-harm. Whatever the fuck a therapist would call it.

I could have done it myself, taken a razor blade to my thighs or my wrists. But I knew that Thatcher needed to cut. It would have been selfish of me to keep this to myself. The impulse that feeds my soul to burn things is the same one that flows inside of him. Instead of needing fire, he needs to see crimson.

He needs to put on his classical music bullshit down in his *American Psycho* basement that smells like a hospital and slice. So why would I do it myself when I could give this to Thatch?

We all have different motivations for why we need these things to cope with our lives.

It's not about knowing the reason or even understanding it. It's not about any of that. It's about being there for each other. Being what each other requires to get by. We made an unspoken oath when we were young. That it didn't matter how far or how dark we had to go, if one of the guys needed something, we would always be there. We would be that for them, whatever the cost.

The rest of the world had shit on us. Thrown us away like trash. Forgotten us. Left us to decay and rot.

All we have is one another, and that will always be enough.

"Alright, that's ten," he says, lifting the blade from my body. I can hear him push his rolling chair away from me.

"Two more."

"I'm going to have to go lower. The ones at the top still haven't healed from our last session."

"Then go lower. Just give me more."

I'd been doing this on a smaller scale ever since I started sparring with Alistair. Exposing myself to agony and anguish, I still do that. But last year, it was vital I had more.

I came to Thatcher that day, after Sage, after I'd stupidly put myself in a position I never should've been in, looking to discipline myself so that I would never, ever trust someone like that ever again.

Alistair's punches wouldn't have given me what I required. They were only surface-level, just like my father's. They only bruised the exterior. I didn't release anything, and I need to make sure that I released *everything*.

My body was desperate. I needed to purge my bloodstream entirely of Sage Donahue, and he was the man for the job. I know Thatcher, and I know what he is capable of.

He's able to bore into my body and extract her. He's a skilled surgeon using scalpels to remove a virus that had taken over my entire system, and every session, he pulls her out more and more.

But she's a goddamn tumor. Every time he tears a piece of her out of me, she grows back ten times more.

"I had always been curious about why you showed up at my door that day, Van Doren," he says suddenly, starting another wide line from one side of my back. "And I believe I have a solid theory now. Do you want me to share? Or do you want to tell me yourself?"

I turn my head just a bit, looking over my shoulder. "I don't come here to talk, Thatcher. Not about this. That's the rule—no questions."

"Oh, this isn't a question. It's a statement." The music changes to another piano-themed melody, overcast and somber. "I'm just giving you a chance to admit it to yourself first."

"What are you getting at, man?"

"Well," he starts, hitting a particularly sensitive spot and making me hiss in discomfort, "it never made sense. There hadn't been anything to throw you over the edge. You were content being Alistair's and your father's punching bag. What was the nail in the coffin that drove you to me? To this?"

The taste of strawberry vodka and betrayal.

I drop my head down on my arms in front of me, staring down at the concrete ground.

My last hope in humanity had been set ablaze by a set of neon blue eyes and a pretty poison mouth.

"It didn't add up. Not until the other night."

My body freezes, going solid. There's no way he noticed. He couldn't have.

Behind me, I hear him drop the scalpel into a bowl, clunking around the metal. The cutting is done, and now begins the cleanup. The sound of paper tearing echoes as he prepares to bandage me up.

"Sweetheart Sage Donahue," he says keenly, always so smug, especially when he knows he's right about something. "How long did you

plan on keeping her from us?"

I go pale and not just from the blood loss.

He swipes a wet cloth across my back, making me suck in air through my teeth. I bow my spine a little, letting my head fall back as he wipes me down with alcohol, cleaning the wound out

"I don't know what you're going on about," I say coolly, shaking my head a bit, hoping my calm nature will throw him off.

"Don't insult my intelligence or my instincts, Rook. I saw the way you looked at her when she showed up at the cliff. The way she would have continued asking us, without care of her pride or our opposition. But as soon as you said something, she was done. I know what it looks like for a person to be broken, and your simple words disintegrated her."

Thatcher knows the human body and its reactions better than most of the population. He knows the arteries and veins that ride throughout your limbs by name, organs, and their functions, but he is also the only person who doesn't understand it beyond a chemical level.

He's observant; there is nothing he misses. He picks up on body language, tone shifts, how certain mannerisms differ from person to person. He watches and can replicate it almost flawlessly, but it's not real.

He can fake it. He can even make others believe it.

However, the reality is Thatcher has no empathy.

That portion of his brain hadn't got the memo apparently, because he feels absolutely nothing. Understands nothing about emotions of the heart or emotions in general. He has no one to compare it to.

So while he could spew for hours and hours about how the respiratory system works in minute detail, he would never grasp what it feels like to breathe for another person. Would never be able to comprehend just how powerful betrayal and heartbreak are.

That's why, yes, I think he valued Rose as a human, just as he does us. He is bound by loyalty and that alone. He's the most clearheaded in this situation because he has no emotional attachment. It's simply a business transaction. Rose was taken, and he is going to do what he needs to in order to replace that asset or at the very least fill its gap.

So he's the very last person I want to have this conversation with. Yet, somehow, I knew it would be him.

“So I’ll ask you again, and only once more, Van Doren,” he warns, tone cold and removed. “What does Sage have to do with this? What are you punishing yourself for this time?”

“Fuck this, man.” I jerk away from him, exploding out of my chair and knocking it forward. “You’ve got no idea what you’re talking about, and I didn’t sign up for your psychobabble bullshit.”

I grab my shirt that rests on the shiny steel table in the middle of the room, tugging it over my shoulders and making the tape pull against my skin, the wounds beneath pulsating with a muted pain.

“If she is going to be a problem for us, if she puts us at risk for what we are doing—if she is *your* problem—then it’s my business to know. I won’t have you messing this up because you can’t keep your impulsive hormones in check.”

I turn, stepping up in his face, but he barely blinks, rolling the white sleeves of his shirt down his arms. So technical, so precise that there isn’t a drop of blood on him.

“Don’t you fucking go there, you pretentious cunt,” I bite out. “I would never do anything that would put you all at risk. She is nothing, has always been nothing.”

Acid eats my insides, my body’s way of calling me a liar. Lying to someone I call a friend, one of my closest friends.

I want to believe it—that she is nothing. Goddamn I would give anything for her to be nothing.

But she’s still living inside of me like a parasite, feeding on me.

The calmness in his movements almost pisses me off more. The way he lazily drags his eyes up to mine, making direct contact.

“I’m not saying you would, Rook.” He pauses. “Not intentionally.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re impetuous. You act hastily, and you are driven by your desires. I trust you. I don’t trust your emotions.”

I roll my tongue across my teeth, nodding sarcastically. “Go eat another dictionary, fucking prick,” I grunt. “I don’t need to be a robot in order to be in control.”

I’m done with this conversation. I’m done with this session.

Stepping away, I turn around, heading for the steps that lead to the upper portion of the house, where everything is warm and homey, unlike

what lives beneath it—this cold, emotionless place that Thatcher dwells inside of.

“If I figured it out, it won’t be long before the others do. Don’t let them, us, find out from someone else, Rook. If we don’t have trust, then we have nothing,” he says to my back, making me pause at the top of the stairs.

I rotate my head, just enough to look over my shoulder, down the incline at the well-put-together man at the bottom.

“Thatcher, why the fuck do you care?” I ask. “Let’s be honest here—you don’t care about anything. It’s loyalty for you, that’s it. So why the hell do you care about me and my personal shit?”

I’m not the only one with secrets, and I’m sick of him acting like I am. Alistair has them, Silas, and so does Thatch. He probably has more than any of us. One time in our friendship he’d opened the vault and told us about his father.

About how he found out, what he saw as a little kid.

How he’d stumbled upon his father’s garage and all the things inside. And once that happened, once his father caught him, Thatcher had become a protégé. Henry Pierson is a smart man and created a way for him and his legacy to live forever—turning his innocent child into a serial killer prodigy.

Thatch never told us what his father made him do, what he made him watch, but I can guarantee it wasn’t cartoons.

The silence goes on until I hear his voice, still and steady, “I get to hurt you. Alistair can hurt you. Even Silas can. But no one else.” He stops, just a moment before continuing. “No one else gets to hurt you, Van Doren. No one.”



CHAPTER TWENTY

the gauntlet

sage

“Alistair is going to slaughter me.”

I don’t bother disagreeing with her. When he finds out she was lying about where she was, he might just kill us all.

“He’ll be alright. It’s not your problem that he’s copping out this year. Doesn’t mean we have to miss out on the fun.” I say.

According to Briar, the Hollow Boys are opting out of this year’s game. Briar had balls lying to him, telling him she’d be in her dorm with Lyra all night. I hope for her sake and mine he never knows any different.

“Are you guys sure about this?” Lyra asks. “Last year, people ended up in the hospital.”

“Don’t freak out. It’s just a game. How bad can it be?”

I let Briar’s question hang in the air.

I’m not sure how to answer, because I know once the Wastelands find out about the guys not participating, they’ll be even more vicious in their pursuit of victory.

The wind hits me harshly in the face, making me shiver. It may be the first day of spring on the calendar, but there won’t be any blooming of flowers in this chilly weather. The snow stopped weeks ago, but the cold lingered and will for another several weeks.

Spring means bright colors and fresh sunshine. Here it just means a different shade of gray.

I walk in the middle between Briar and Lyra, all of us bundled in warm clothing: boots, beanies—Lyra’s even sporting a dark red scarf. We have no idea how long these games last, but we know the temperature will only drop the longer we’re outside.

We watch as several people in front of us pile through the inactive security gates that normally scan you for illegal objects. Tonight, they're just another obstacle. I press my hands into the cool metal, vaulting myself over the spindles and onto the other side, ready to follow the small crowd inside the park.

I'm knocked hard in the side by a rambunctious set of guys who are jumping over and pushing each other through.

"Watch it, dickhead," I hiss.

One of them turns to me, grinning as he takes a slow glance down my body. "That stick up your ass won't help you tonight, princess. If that nudge is too much for you, I think you better leave before you and your rich friends wind up hurt."

I slit my eyes. "It's a shame you boys showed up just to lose. Again."

He cackles, full of wickedness, full of promise. "That's a pretty big check you're cashing there. You better have something to back it up. Wouldn't want that shit to bounce."

They retreat farther into the dark, their bodies disappearing but their words lingering. This is a game, but at the end of the day, it's a battle. One that will be fought for with blood and aggression, built-up resentment that had been fueling a century-old rivalry.

The rich versus the poor.

The Wastelands versus daddy's money.

"I hate cocky assholes," Briar huffs as she leaps over.

"You're literally dating one," I joke, smiling a bit.

Lyra laughs out loud, lightening the mood, taking the heaviness from the situation down. I hated that Briar had to lie to Alistair. I know it killed her to do it, but he wouldn't have let her go. And I think she feels what I do —what we all feel.

This is special.

It's different.

Our way of solidifying our bond. Something for us and only us.

"They're right, you know." The sound of nails on a chalkboard fills my ears. "You shouldn't be here."

I don't need to turn around to know who it is or even ask who that statement was directed towards. I'd been hearing that same pompous

baritone since I was in kindergarten. One of the only good things about being locked away in a mental institution was getting away from Easton.

There's one singular emotion I feel towards him: pure, unfiltered rage. There's nothing I want more than to watch him crumble beneath me. I have a hit list of people I'm going to destroy before I leave Ponderosa Springs this go-around, and right below my father sits my ex-boyfriend and his corrupt crown.

"How inconvenient for you, then, because I'm here," I say, spinning around so I'm facing East for the first time in almost a year. "And I plan on staying."

He has nothing over me anymore. Not Rook, not Rose. I'd given in to his wants, his father's wants, to save my sister. To protect Rook. Now that I no longer have to do that, I refuse to bow to a prick who's beneath me.

Who had always been beneath me.

"Nice to see you again, Sage." He eyes me carefully, making me physically ill that I'd ever let him touch me. Let him inside my body.

"Too soon, if you ask me." I reply.

I almost laugh at him, how even in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt he still reeks of that prestigious attitude he was so proud of. His small group of friends follows close behind, and for a second, I hate myself for ever allowing myself to do that very same thing once.

Follow.

Never again, I think. Never.

"I see you've made yourself some new friends. Does your daddy know about who you're hanging out with?" He raises an eyebrow, too perfect to be natural. "I suppose it doesn't matter anymore now, does it? You're already tainted goods—might as well hang out with those who share that trait."

"Tainted goods you were trying to screw last semester," Briar butts in, standing tall next to me. Lyra steps close, her jaw taut and eyes harsh.

It would seem I'm not the only person with a bad taste in their mouth after dealing with Easton Sinclair. Warmth spreads across my body knowing I have people who have my back, even in this small situation of confrontation. I know I could handle it on my own, but it still feels good to have them there.

To have someone there.

“Does your father know that you’re trespassing, about to break God knows how many laws tonight? I know he likes to keep a tight leash on you.”

He grinds his teeth. “Watch yourself.”

“What? I hit a sore spot with daddy dearest, East?” I pout maliciously.

He takes purposeful, harsh steps before he closes in, staring down his nose at me. I stand my ground, lifting my chin. I’d never been afraid of him before, and I don’t plan on doing it now.

Powerful men don’t need to prove anything, but weak men will lash out when their reputation is threatened. And Easton has always been weak, doing his father’s bidding, taking care of his dirty laundry, dictating him.

“You should have stayed gone,” he hisses. “Am I going to have to make sure you end up dead like your sister so I can get rid of you.”

My knee-jerk reaction is to slap him for even bringing her up. I’m sick and fucking tired of people taking her name in vain like that. Talking about her so carelessly, using her death as a weapon against me. I would give anything to rip it out of their mouths, to retaliate against them all, until they’re nothing but dust.

I just wish the guys would see that. That we have the same motive.

Alistair, Thatcher, Silas, and Rook.

Years ago, I’d have argued we were an entirely different species, and now, we couldn’t be more alike. But they’re never going to believe that—believe me.

I gather up all my fury, all my unearthed anger, all the things I never said to him before, and spit on his shoes. My white saliva sticks to his expensive designer sneakers.

“You want rid of me? Then do it, pussy,” I bite out. “But you better make sure you kill me first, Sinclair. ’Cause I’m coming for your fucking head.”

I’d waited years to voice my distaste for Ponderosa Springs’ golden boy, out in the open, where anyone could hear me. I want them all to know just how much I hate the one they worship. I want them all to know that he’s nothing but gum beneath my feet. That he’s nothing but a pawn in his father’s chess game.

More people flood the gates, causing a commotion around us, but we stand rooted, staring one another down. My threat sits in the air like a

pendulum swaying back and forth.

Briar grabs my forearm gently. “He isn’t worth it. Don’t let him ruin tonight. Come on.”

I stare him down a little longer before I let her pull me away, not because I wouldn’t stand there toe-to-toe with him all day, but because she’s right. He’s not going to ruin this.

“God, I hate him. I’d love to feed him to fire ants,” Lyra says, shaking her head.

“Lyra, I mean this as a compliment,” I say gently, “but you scare me sometimes.”

She lifts her mouth a little, giving me a side smile. “Thank you.”

We link arms, leaving Easton and his puppies behind. I try not to think about how we’re all on the same team, and at some point, we might have to actually work together with them tonight.

This is the mark of something new, something good. The kindling of a fire I hadn’t felt in a long time. Briar and Lyra feel like a real connection, real friends, and I’m ashamed to admit I’d never had that before. And the more I’m around them, the more I want that.

It’s odd how normal things had been, how simple it felt the past few weeks—walking to class together, study sessions, movie nights. I even signed up for a theatre class, a passion I’d buried, thinking it died when I was sent away, only to discover it was waiting for me to come back all along.

I’d become a member of their Loner Society, and it felt good.

I’m going on living, existing, and I try not to feel guilty when I enjoy it, unafraid of if they learn my secrets or not, because everything about me had basically been aired out.

I can’t go two days without thinking about how much Rose would love this. How she would have flourished in college and with these girls. They would have loved her. She would have loved them. There are so many things Rosie didn’t get a chance to love.

Easton, Cain, my family, they had ruined enough good in my life, and I refuse to let them take anything else from me.

Music ricochets within the park, a few of the rides lighting up, awakening from their hibernation. This only builds everyone’s excitement, reminding us all of why we’d come in the first place.

To win.

The thought alone makes my adrenaline pump. Nerves buzz in my stomach as I try to guess what game we'll be doing. I'm ready to play; even though I know West Trinity plays dirty, I'm prepared.

Even with the lights illuminating parts of the park, it's still dark. With no running water during the winter, this place feels barren and eerie, setting the stage for a notoriously treacherous game we can't help ourselves from playing. The wind howls like a siren's warning, the trees looming above and the fog starting to settle.

During the summer, it overflows with locals and their children, but now, it just feels like another forgotten piece that Ponderosa Springs had brushed aside. Another ghost.

Together, we make it to where the rest of the group has congregated, pooling around a small wooden stage where they sometimes perform aquatic-themed shows for little kids. Tonight, it is the starting point, where we'll find out what we're up against.

We stand near the back, and when the music dims and the sound of boots replaces it, we watch as four cloaked figures walk up onto the platform. They stand still, all of them facing the front, while one of them holds a torch in his right hand.

They peer down at us, waiting. Everyone settles their voices, the mass silencing. They're all wearing gas masks, their identity shielded from us. My heart thumps inside my ears, the blood rushing quickly around my body.

"Welcome to the Gauntlet," one of them speaks, his voice carrying. It's not something loud or obnoxious; it's opaque and threatening. It heeds an unspoken warning that while this may be fun, it won't be easy.

Apprehension trickles into my bloodstream, my eyes looking around at both our opponents and teammates. Some of them are equipped with book bags that have who knows what inside, making me feel unprepared.

It's that feeling of right before you head inside a haunted house—it sounds like a fun idea when you're in the back of the line, but now that you're next up, it seems a lot scarier.

One of the figures strikes a match, the hiss of the flame echoing, just before they light the end of the torch and hold it up in the air with purpose.

"As tradition goes, Ponderosa Springs selected the location, and now West Trinity must share the game they have selected," he says.

Another one speaks this time. “This year’s game will be Capture the flag.”

“Let’s fucking go!”

“Hell yeah!”

Chants and shouts reverberate. The energy in the area is charged, electrifying like you’re holding on to a live wire. It passes through us all.

I look over at Briar and Lyra. “Simple enough, right?”

“Easy,” Briar reassures.

“The flags have already been hidden in your directed areas. You can play as a unit or separately, but the object is the same. Get the other team’s flag before they get yours. West Trinity will start in the north and Ponderosa Springs in the south. When you reach the starting place, a siren will let you know when the game has begun.”

Thirty-five acres of water rides surrounded by pines—all of it fair play. They could be anywhere.

It was a lot of space to cover. Almost too much.

“Anything goes. No rules. No regulations,” they state. “Winner takes all, and as always, try not to die.”



“Guys,” Lyra puffs, “I can’t breathe.” She holds her side, bending over a bit as she sucks in air deeply.

“Shh,” I whisper, a thin line of sweat stuck to my forehead, my chest aching from pulling in cold air.

We’re hidden behind a dunk tank, the booth shielding us from the front. We’re in their territory and have been for the last twenty minutes, with no luck in finding the flag. A sharp whistle pierces my ears as I watch another flare land a few feet in front of us.

My eyes are itchy from the smoke they let off—apparently, they’d brought an entire arsenal of things to prevent us from winning: smoke

grenades, flares, booby traps of all kinds. I saw a guy get pepper sprayed.

I'm afraid because it's apparent they will do anything to win. Even if it means causing harm.

My entire body hurts from running.

We'd stuck to the plan: lie low, stay out of sight. We aren't strong enough or equipped with anything that could fend off our opponents. So we decided going for their flag was a better plan than finding ours and protecting it.

We'd maneuvered our way through the park, dodging West Trinity players.

"All the indoor rides are locked. There is no way it's inside. It has to be up high somewhere," Briar mutters, keeping her voice low.

"The only place that's elevated in this area is the Drop Zone. It's a little bit ahead of us, but everything else over here is low to the ground."

"Let's head that way, then. We need to hurry, I doubt Easton and his posse are going to be able to fend off West Trinity for much longer."

I scan the area one more time before we break from cover, pacing slowly and trying not to make any noise. Screams and ominous sounds resonate in the distance. Every single creak or howl from the wind has me on edge.

Adrenaline masks my fear, keeping me moving even when my brain starts to panic. We are three girls split off from the group in enemy territory. Enemies that are ready to go as far as they need to in order to defeat us.

I try not to think about it, letting the drive to win fuel me.

My breath comes out in visible puffs, and these layers of clothing only make me sweat more. The Drop Zone is within sight, the winding wooden stairs that lead to the enormous slide standing out from the rest of the rides.

It has to be there.

"Hey," Briar whispers. "What's that?"

She points to our left, where the wave pool sits stagnant. It's probably the only thing with water inside this place during this season. The structure starts wide, tapering in the closer you get to the concrete wall that keeps all the water inside, and stores the machinery that makes the waves. Barely any water is left in the shallow entry of the pool; all of it has gathered to the deeper portion, where it sits dark and murky.

It's then I notice the large sign that sits atop the concrete wall ledge, reading Wave Lagoon. Streaming across the top of the sign is a banner with ribbons flapping in the air, and in the center is a tied orange flag.

"Holy shit, we found it," I breathe, a smile on my face, too overcome with pride to notice incoming danger.

"Thank the gods," Lyra wheezes.

"Gods?" I laugh.

"I'm agnostic." She shrugs. "It feels wrong to say just one."

Before we can start towards the flag, I hear a sharp whistle pierce the air, followed by a bright red light flying through the sky before it rolls in front of us. The flare spews sparks and smoke that burns my eyes.

The group of guys from earlier walks from the shadows, each from a different direction, surrounding us in a circle. Two more flares are lit and sent our way. The irritating smoke makes me cough as I cover my nose with my arm.

"I was hoping I'd find you again tonight," One of them says, swinging a hockey stick threateningly in a circle. "We did warn you girls."

We were so close, and now it feels so far away.

"What do we do?" Lyra says, her voice nervous as they loom closer.

I hate not having an answer. What *could* we do? There are three of them and three of us, but they're also holding weapons. There isn't much we can do except run.

"We have to split up. We gotta run," Briar says, coughing as she does.

"Sage, go for the flag. Lyra, run the opposite direction."

"And you?" I ask, nervous for her answer.

"Don't worry about it. Just go."

It's a risky move, a gamble, and I don't like it. They could catch us before we even get away—they could catch us in general. But we have to take that chance. We have to do something.

We each take a breath, this moment standing still in time, the predators closing in.

I sprint first, hitting the gap between two of them while Lyra does the same in the opposite direction. My feet push me forward, my boots slamming into the ground as I ignore any logic and just let my body propel me. It's pure adrenaline, and all I can think about is grasping that flag.

Ending this.

Winning this.

It's only when I'm several feet away that I turn around, catching a glimpse of Briar, who hadn't run at all. She'd stayed there like bait. The guy with the hockey stick pulls back, clipping her in the back of the legs with the blunt end. Her cry of pain makes me stop, and I immediately want to run back to her.

As she falls to her knees, her blonde hair swaying in front of her face, she screams, "Sage, go!"

It's a shot of motivation, knowing if I can reach the flag, all of this will be over. One of the other guys heads towards me, and it's then I begin running again.

"Don't let her get the flag!"

I pump my arms, forcing my legs to work faster, to move past the burn in my lungs.

I run up the side of the pool, climbing over the gate that places me on the side only employees are allowed. I hear his footsteps approaching, his hands moving against the gate as he closes in on me. I look around, trying to figure out my next move, what I'm going to do next.

"Where to now, girl?" he mutters darkly.

"Up," I breathe.

I grab the wall, lifting myself up onto it, seeing there is enough space for me to stand with both feet, but only in this area. I'm going to have to walk sideways, my back to the wave pool beneath with nothing to hold on to.

I turn back to the man closing in on me and back towards the sludge-filled pool. The water is dark, black as coal with pieces of ice floating at the top from the cold weather. Either lose and get beat to death or risk falling in.

The fall won't kill me—it's not high enough to do that—but my fear of water makes everything worse.

Chills run along my arms as I place my right foot on the ledge, pressing my hands and face into the cold sign. It burns my warm skin, but I don't dare move too hastily. The wind hits me hard, making me lean into the sign more, trying not to let it push me away.

My throat is so dry, making it impossible to swallow, to breathe really.

My other foot wobbles, but it follows, and I'm soon shimmying across, my heels dangling over the edge as my toes try to keep me balanced.

Don't fall. Don't fall. Don't fall.

I work my way closer to the center where the flag dangles, flapping around wildly.

My heart slams against my chest the closer I get, pressure weighing heavily on my shoulder, trying to work on nothing but instinct and not about Briar, about Lyra.

Reaching the center of the sign, I glance up, the orange material directly above me. The finish line is right there, victory so close I can taste it. My fingers tingle as I lean up on my tippy-toes.

Inside my head, I'm lagging. Everything is delayed—I feel sluggish like I'm moving in slow motion.

My hand curls around the material, feeling it in my palm. I pull it from its fixed spot, bringing it to my chest, holding it there like it's a newborn baby.

I did it. We did it.

“Goddammit!” someone shouts, just before a hand is slammed into the sign, making it shake. It dislodges my balance, and there is nothing I can do to stop myself from falling backwards. My arms flail, desperately searching for something to grab onto.

But there is nothing.

The fall isn't gradual like in the movies.

No, I fall fast, hard, crashing into the freezing water like a star from the sky at a million miles an hour and burning alive when I land.

Pieces of solid ice slam into my back before the water takes me. It submerges me almost instantly, swallowing me up like a hungry beast.

I'm wrapped in the frigid hands of death, curling around me like an unwanted hug, and am overwhelmed by the intensity of the cold. It's all around me, sinking into my skin, penetrating my bones, and it just keeps sinking deeper every second.

And there is nothing but darkness. Even as I open my eyes beneath the surface, it's just filled with nothing but inky black.

I want to swim to the surface. I want the stinging in my lungs to go away, but my extremities...I want to fight, to do something, but nothing is working. My brain has stopped, and my body has no clue what to do. There is no feeling anywhere.

I'm paralyzed. Too frozen to move, to save myself.

Fear has taken over.

The fear of dying and not being able to prevent it. It's out of my control completely.

Fear of not knowing what is coming for me next. The fear of the unknown.

Suddenly, I can hear music. Rosie's music.

The songs she used to play in her room when she was working on a sculpture, and I wonder if this was what she felt right before she died.

I want to cry for her because I hope she didn't feel afraid, but I know she was. She was alone, wondering when we'd show up to save her, but we never came, not in time. She died thinking she was going to be rescued, and we weren't even aware she was missing.

Not until it was too late.

She died alone and frightened.

Left the earth in the exact opposite way of how she lived.

She was always the brave one, the one surrounded by happiness and people who loved her.

And now we would die the same.

Alone with no one to save us.

I'm taking in too much water through my nose and mouth. There's comfort in knowing I'll see her again. Spots fill my vision, everything suddenly becoming hazy, and I feel high. I'm losing consciousness, falling further and further away from myself.

Finally giving in to the pain, into the water that I knew would come for me eventually.

Warmth coils around me, and I think this is it. I'm dying.

But I brutally meet with the vicious air. It snaps against my skin, this abrupt sense of energy coursing through me, and a violent urge to cough takes over.

My body trembles from my wheezing and the cold.

I'm not sure if I'm happy to be alive or just shocked.

I cling to whatever it is that's holding me, my hands grasping at it, clinging to it with everything I have because it feels like the opposite of death. It feels like life, like air.

"You don't get to die," I hear. "Not that easily."

Even through my muddled senses, even bogged down with water, I can smell him. Like cannabis and smoke. Gasoline and old leather. He feels firm beneath my fingers, warm below the layer of moisture that's covering both of us.

My eyes crack open, and through my murky vision, I see him.

Rook.

His wet hair is stuck to his face, cheeks flushed and square jaw tight as he tries to stop shivering.

He looks so ruined yet so beautiful.

Such a pretty boy, but even Lucifer was pretty once upon a time.

The most beautiful.

An angel.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

what's due is done

rook

I knew her coming back would be nothing but a hazard.

It would do nothing but distract us and put us more at risk. Sage had always been a wild card. A slow poison that corrupted you before you even knew you were infected.

Trouble.

“Alistair, wait, Alistair, please, I’m fine—” Briar begs, trying with no luck to slow him down. Blood drips from his hands, his knuckles split and oozing. The damage he’d done to that dude’s face will be permanent.

Sage is sitting on the pavement, a jacket wrapped around her shoulders as she tries to fight the cold. Her wet hair brushes her chin as she lifts her head to the freight train headed in her direction.

Alistair pulls Sage up by the front of her jacket, hands squeezing the material tightly as he presses her into the side of his car aggressively.

“What the hell were you thinking,” he growls, shaking her body as she speaks. “You’re nothing but fucking selfish. You almost got her killed.”

Her blue eyes are so washed-out, lips the same color. She probably doesn’t even understand what’s happening right now, still dizzy from the lack of oxygen. And now she has an out-of-control monster in her face.

When Briar wasn’t in her dorm like she’d told Alistair, he went into warfare mode.

After everything that happened last semester with his brother Dorian and Briar being kidnapped, he assumed the worst. Alistair is never afraid, ever, unless it has to do with losing Briar. That’s the only thing he fears in life. Not even death takes precedence over her.

Thankfully Silas put a tracker on her phone for Alistair’s peace of mind, and when he saw where they were, there was nothing stopping him

from finding her.

We'd shown up just after Briar took a hockey stick to the back of her legs and a right hook to the mouth. It had been brutal to watch, not only for myself but for my friend. I was planning on grabbing one of the assholes who'd hit her to help him, but I'd gotten distracted.

By a girl with torn wings.

She'd fallen hard, so quickly I wasn't even sure I'd seen it.

I watched, my fist clenched, waiting for her to resurface, and when she didn't, I went after her.

She looked so pale when we broke the surface, so broken. Like she'd already given in to death when she'd sunk into the water. And that pissed me off—she's not allowed to die. Not like that, not without a fight.

I couldn't watch her die, not at that moment. Because all I saw were false moments.

All I could see was the girl she'd pretended to be when she was with me, underneath me, all around me, and not who she actually was. I gave in to that weakness, to her weakness. I gave in to the temptation of her all over again and stupidly dove in after her.

I'd given in just like I did when I found out she was committed. When I drove haphazardly to Monarch Mental Health Institution and made sure she was there. That she was alive and wasn't dead.

I was pathetic.

A pitiful excuse for a man, because I couldn't let go of the lie. Even when she'd shown me her truths, every nasty, ugly truth, I still wanted those lies. All those pretty poisonous lies—I wanted them, and I couldn't let them die.

And fuck did I hate myself for that.

"I'm sorry. I-I didn't expect—"

"You didn't expect what? My girlfriend to get the shit beat out of her while you worried about winning a game?"

"Alistair!" Briar yells, pulling at his leather jacket. "Put her down! It was my fault. I was the one who wanted to go! It was me, it wasn't Sage."

His jaw goes solid, the muscle ticking a few times. His dark eyes bore into Sage's empty blue ones.

"If you ever put her in danger again, I'll kill you."

My feet move before my brain can really catch up, and I step closer to them. The threat isn't a light one—Alistair never says anything he doesn't mean.

And I don't like the way it makes me feel right now.

Making me feel something other than respect for my best friend.

Making me feel hostile towards him.

I step to the side of him, placing a hand on his chest. "Chill out. Briar is fine. Focus on your girl."

He looks at me, tilting his head suspiciously. I hold my ground, pressing into his chest so he gets the message that he needs to let her go.

With one last heated glare at Sage, he releases his grip and immediately turns to Briar, stepping away from the car and scooping her face in his hands. There is still so much anger rolling off him that I can practically see steam coming from his ears, but he softens just a little when he looks at her. Lifting his bloody thumb, he swipes at her swollen bottom lip.

"This is not over, Little Thief."

She nods, accepting his wrath before wrapping her arm around his waist and sinking into his body. "I'm sorry," I hear her whisper before her voice fades into something only they can hear.

I turn to Sage, who is slumped against the car, looking at the ground.

I shove my hands into my wet jeans, hoping the sticky material will prevent my fingers from doing something I don't want them to do.

Something idiotic like reach for her.

The way she clung to me in the water, how she was desperately seeking me, stealing my energy. Like she would die if I let her go.

It fucked me in the head.

The months of celibacy I had endured were nothing compared to the pain of that moment.

I just have to keep reminding myself and my birdbrained heart that it's all a mirage. She had been engaged to another guy the entire time I was fucking her, learning her, inhaling her. I'd been an experiment.

You were a game, Rook.

That was it.

"Looks like you had all the fun without us." Thatcher slams the door of Silas's passenger door, walking towards us.

“What happened?” Silas questions, glancing at Briar, then pauses to stare at Sage. Staring for a lot longer than I would say is necessary.

Her coming back was hard on me, but I also know it was hard on him for an entirely different reason.

Sage and Rosemary were twins, so the likeness is there. It had always been there, but when one of them is dead and had been for almost a year now, the similarities are more obvious.

“They played the Gauntlet. Sage fell in the wave pool, and Briar got hit,” I inform them both, grinding my teeth. How naive were they? They had to have known better. Every single year, people leave the Gauntlet injured. It’s not something you play with no experience.

We would know. We’re usually the ones doing the injuring.

“And you?” Thatcher directs towards a sitting Lyra. Tucked away on the asphalt with her head sitting on her knees, she flinches when he speaks to her. His voice yanks her from her own little world she’d been inside of, and his eyes penetrate hers. “What happened to you?”

“Nothing. Uh,” she stutters. “I’m-I’m fine.”

He continues to stare before giving a curt nod and sucking his teeth. “Did we at least win?”

“Thatcher, shut the fuck up.”

“Yes,” Briar and Alistair answer at the same time, proving yet again why they make such a good match.

“Good.” Thatcher walks towards Briar, hovering above her frame. One icy hand moves forward, grabbing her chin and tilting her head to the left and back to the right. “Ice that and you should live...unfortunately,” he adds for good measure.

Their conversation fades into the background because it’s at this moment that Silas walks up to Sage. He looks down at her, staring for a moment too long, and starts to remove his hoodie. Once it’s off his arms, he pauses.

“Lift your arms,” he grunts.

Uneasiness settles into my stomach as she finally lifts her gaze to him.

Why the fuck is he looking at her like that? I know he’s probably doing it out of respect for Rosie, but it’s making me anxious.

It’s making me angry.

At myself. At her. At him.

“I don’t want it,” she responds, staring blankly.

“You’re going to freeze to death. Put it on.” He shoves the hoodie into her chest, insisting. Yet, she refuses to react.

I’m only able to watch this. I can’t say a single word as my best friend speaks more to her than he has to anyone in a year.

Jealously bumbles in my gut.

See what she’s doing to me? Wrecking my life all over again. Turning me against my own goddamn friends. Because of her, I’d been angry with Alistair, I’d lied to Thatcher, and now I’m jealous of Silas.

Envious that they have a connection I’ll never be able to understand, and there’s nothing I could say about it.

What am I supposed to do? Walk up to them and piss all over her like some territorial dog?

Sage Donahue had been a lot of things, but mine was never one of them.

I have no right to speak about what I’m watching, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to.

“Why? So you can save me? Make yourself feel better?” she says coldly with no trace of emotion in her tone at all. Here she is, the cruel-hearted bitch I’d come to know so well. The one that could break you just after building you up. “So you can make up for not being there for Rose?”

“I’m just trying to make sure you don’t die,” he replies.

“Yeah? And why didn’t you do the same for my sister?”

I knew what she was capable of when it came to that silver tongue. How reckless she was with her words when she was upset. How easily she could hurt someone with only her voice.

I’m not going to let that happen to him. Not when he doesn’t deserve it.

“Sage, stop,” I warn, making my way closer to their space, standing close behind them.

“No.” She ignores me. “You were supposed to be there, but you let her walk home from the library alone.”

Here she comes dragging up broken memories, ones that Silas doesn’t need to be reminded of because he never forgets it. When Sage hurts, she has to make everyone else hurt around her.

“You were supposed to be there!” Her voice has upgraded to a shout as she pokes him in the chest. Yet, he stands hard like a statue, unmoving, letting her words pellet his hard exterior.

“We were supposed to protect her!” The first tear streams down her face, pain leaking from her eyes that no one can heal.

And if anyone understands that, it’s Silas.

They could find common ground in their grief, having lost the same person. They would be able to comprehend each other’s emotions, something I’ll never be able to do for either of them. Especially Silas.

It doesn’t matter how close I was to Rose; I didn’t have a bond with her like he did. I can’t help him the way I want to. I can’t make this better for him, no matter how many times a day I check-in.

There is nothing I can do to help him heal from her, but what I can do is make sure he gets his revenge for it.

“And now look, she’s dead! She died, Silas, all alone! Why didn’t you protect her? Why couldn’t we save her?”

His armor breaks—one of the harsh bullets penetrates through the metal and sinks through the bone. I see it in the way he cringes like it’s more than emotional trauma. It’s a physical discomfort that circulates across him.

Closing his eyes for a brief second before reopening them, he reaches forward to touch Sage.

“Rosie, I—”

“What?” She flinches, struck by his words. “Did you just call me Rosie?”

A distress signal is sent to my brain. A universal panic.

I try to push the dread down. Try to tell myself it was an honest mistake, a mix-up. He’s been taking his meds—I’ve watched him every single day.

He is fine. It was just a fuck up. That’s it.

But with his diagnosis, it’s hard to brush things like that off when I’m constantly aware of his symptoms and when things are getting worse. I want this to be a coincidence. I want to believe it was a mistake.

“That’s enough,” I interrupt, striding between the two of them. I’m just not sure who I’m protecting. Am I blocking Sage? Or am I shielding Silas?

All I know is that Sage is in the mood to hurt someone. When she's in distress, she takes it out on those around her. She never wants to hurt alone.

So if she wants to hurt someone, she can do that to me, not Silas.

Never Silas.

"Screw you," she spits, looking up at me. "Screw all of you. Acting like you deserve payback more than me. As if she meant nothing to me. Like she wasn't my goddamn twin!"

"It has nothing to do with that. We know we don't deserve it, but we also know we don't fucking trust you," I argue, not backing down from her outrage.

If she wants to be nasty, then fine, we can get nasty.

"No, you"—she pokes my chest with her pointer finger—"don't trust me, Rook. Which is rich coming from someone who lies to his friends." She looks me dead in the eyes, warning me. Cautioning me that if I'm not careful, she could do some heavy damage.

She could out us right here, right now. I wouldn't put it past her either—she doesn't care how deep she has to dig to ruin someone.

She's playing with fire coming back here and trying to fuck my life up all over again.

But I'm not letting that happen again.

This time, it won't be a lake house I burn. It'll be her pasty skin left in a pile of ashes.

I breathe through my nose, my jaw tightening. "I knew saving you was a waste of fucking time. I should have just let you drown."

"If you knew that, then why did you? Huh?" She turns her nose up at me, hands balled up in tight fists by her sides. "For a guy who acts like the villain, you sure do love playing the hero, don't you? That's what you like, right, Rook? Saving the broken ones? You wanna be the hero?"

"Do I look like a goddamn hero?" I grab her waist with both of my hands, pressing her flesh tightly as I haul her up the length of my body, then sling her damp frame across my shoulder so she is dangling down my back.

"This is over," I tell her while she fights me the entire way like I knew she would.

She needs to shut her pink mouth, to learn that her comments have consequences.

I let her beat into my back, pushing to get away from my hold, making the raw marks beneath my shirt sore.

With one arm hooked around her, I use the other to grab the handle of her car door, jerking it open and tossing her roughly into the back seat. Her body sprawls out across the plush material, her chest rising and falling with unbridled emotion that I'm ready to absorb.

I'll take her anger, her irrational feelings—I would take them all.

I place both of my hands on the doorframe, bracing myself, trying desperately to ignore the memory of the last time I saw her like this. Laid out in her back seat, naked. Smoking my blunt, staring up at me with those fuck-me eyes.

Now they're just fuck-you eyes.

It's hard to tell which one I like more.

Like a feral cat, she moves quickly, sitting up on her knees and using her palms to shove into my chest, using mild-level strength to try and move me.

"Let me the hell out," she shouts, only becoming more and more agitated with my unmoving frame.

Yeah, that's it. Let it out, Sage.

Make it hurt.

"No," I rasp, only making things worse. I look down at her wet hair as it sways back and forth with her movements.

Her pressing turns into beating, her tiny fists doing nothing to me as she thumps on my chest, willing me to move. She only succeeds in tiring herself out and making me crave more. This is a breeze compared to what I need. A preview of what it takes to mend my hunger.

"Is that the best you got? You really are all bark and no fucking bite, aren't you?" I edge her on. "Come on, hit me."

I say exactly what I would if I were Alistair, pushing her further into her own rage, drawing out more violent punches. They start to generate more force, and she drops lower, hitting me in the soft flesh of my gut a few times, seizing the wind from my lungs. It's nothing I can't handle. It's not enough to make me move.

"Hit me!" I yell in her face, full of toxic madness and pent-up emotions I haven't fully dealt with. Things I've buried deep, deep down

when we ended. They're all being dug up, making me want to do the one thing I haven't stopped thinking about since she came back.

Ruining her.

Breaking her.

Make her question who she is just like she'd done to me.

"Fucking hit me!"

The dam breaks. It's the match in the powder barrel. The final straw for her.

She sends one solid punch across my jaw, snagging my lip in the process. My head is sent to the right with the force, and I feel the blood leak into my mouth immediately. The tangy metallic taste coats my taste buds, and the bite of the cut has my lip aching.

I snap my head back, locking onto her eyes, seeing them wide and full of tears as her hands cover her mouth. She's shocked that she was capable of something like that, of being pushed to that point.

Everyone is capable of something despicable. It's all about the right time, the right motivation and emotions.

"What is wrong with you," she murmurs. "Why did you let me do that?"

I don't anticipate that question to draw a reaction out of me.

I don't expect it to slice my throat like razor blades and burn everything inside my soul, leaving nothing but unfiltered honesty.

There are a lot of things wrong with me.

But right now, there's only one thing that's really fucking me up.

My fingers snatch the back of her head, gathering a chunk of hair in my grip and yanking her face close to mine. Our noses clash bitterly, so close that I have no choice but to smell her, inhale her for the first time in months.

"You," I bite out, hating the taste of that truth on my tongue. "You are what's wrong with me. You being back here. You walking around campus, showing up at the cliff. You fucking existing."

My breath fans across her face, making her gasp. A charge of friction snaps between our mouths.

"You don't get to do this. You are done," I tell her, "You want to be sad? You want to mourn your sister? You do that, but you don't get to wreak

havoc on everyone else, Sage. You don't get to hurt Silas or anyone because you're angry and damaged. We lost her too. We all lost her."

I leave her no time or room to reply to me. I want her to sit with that, to feel this, so that the next time she is missing Rose, she won't take it out on people who don't deserve it.

Because she's better than that.

I know what it's like to be the target of someone's grief and mourning. I know what it feels like to be the scapegoat, to be the punching bag for someone who lost a piece of themselves.

I refuse to let her turn into my father because she's better.

She drops into the seat when I release her, extracting myself from her space. I glance down at Silas's sweatshirt in her lap, her hands nervously fiddling with it.

"And you're not fucking putting this on," I add for nothing other than to aid my irrational jealousy, capturing the material from her hands and slamming the door closed.

I'm pissed, I'm cold, and I want to get the fuck out of this place. I need to get away from her, from the crazy shit she makes me want to do and the way she makes me feel. Taking a deep breath of air away from her, I rub the back of my head roughly.

I know what I need. I need to let out some aggression. I wanted to spar with Alistair. Go for a ride. Get cut up by Thatcher. Anything that would make her go away, even if it's just for a second.

Briar and Lyra say their goodbyes, driving themselves and Sage back to the dorms and leaving us here to take in everything that had just happened.

"What the hell was that about, Van Doren?" Alistair accuses as I start my bike, letting the engine heat up in this cold weather.

"It was me protecting Silas, what else would it be?" I snap back, too on edge to add his attitude to the list of things I have to deal with.

"I don't need you to protect me."

"Yeah? Just like you don't need me to make sure you take your meds? Or are you okay calling someone your dead girlfriend's name?" My eyes zero in on Silas as I toss his sweatshirt back.

Does he not realize that all I've been doing since Rose died is protect him? Watch him? Spend every single second I'm awake making sure he's

alright, that he's alive?

"Everyone calm down," Thatcher interjects. "It's been a long night, and everyone just needs to relax, alright?"

He's right. Like always. The only voice of reason when our tempers start to flare.

But it's impossible to control myself when it comes to her. It's like every feeling, every emotion I have is heightened when she is around, when she is mentioned. No matter how many times I try to rip her out of my system, she just finds a way to crawl back, turning me into someone I don't recognize, someone who gets pissy with his friends because they look at her a certain way or threaten her.

It was supposed to be a game for me, to break the pretty, little cheerleader. And I was the one who got screwed in the end.

Fuck feelings.

Fuck all this.

"Here." Alistair tosses me a pack of cigarettes. "We all need one."

I pull one of the white sticks from inside, placing it on my lips before handing it over to Silas. I light the end with my Zippo and inhale the stress-relieving smoke into my lungs.

"Six minutes," Thatcher says. "Each cigarette takes six minutes off your life, did you know that?"

I can't help but laugh a little. "Six minutes closer to the goal."

The smoke comes out in rings, swirling around in the night. My head is stuffy from the light head buzz from the rush of nicotine. There are times I think about when we were younger, fourteen and smoking at the cliff, thinking of all the chaotic things we wanted to do to Ponderosa Springs before we left.

Thinking, how the hell did we end up here?

All of us are even more tormented and twisted than we once were, spending every single day getting closer and closer to the grave.

"A little late for the game tonight, boys. The only thing you guys were good at, and look, we can win it without you now. Seems like it's this place's way of telling you it's time to get the fuck out."

Just when I thought the evening was starting to settle down, the king of stirring the pot decides to rear his prestigious head.

The last person who needs to talk shit to me tonight.

Our history is a lengthy, messy one, going all the way back to elementary school, and yes, he was just as annoying then as he is now.

I look over my shoulder to see Easton waltzing into the parking lot as if he owns this as well. He walks like that everywhere, as if everything he steps on is his for the taking, as if he already owns it.

The sense of entitlement he carries reeks from miles away.

“It would seem the only reason you won was because of a girl. Not only do you need your daddy to back you up, you now need ladies to fight your battles? If you’re going for the look of pathetic waste of space, you’re nailing it, Sinclair,” Thatcher comments, leaning against Silas’s car and tucking his hands inside of his slacks.

Easton sneers, not enjoying someone threatening his ego. “That’s right, I forgot to ask, how is Sage? Did we get lucky and she did us all a favor by drowning? Or is what I’ve heard true—Rook jumped in to save his damsel in distress?”

And that’s when the twitching in my hand starts.

The persistent and irresistible urge to do something reckless. Something violent.

It stirs in my gut, taking me over, the impulse to do severe damage to his spinal cord or record his screams while I burn him alive for my new ringtone.

That evil I’d been cursed with as a child starts to blend with my unsettled temper, turning into a scary concoction.

Dynamite just waiting for the fuse to light.

He’s not the main target of our retaliation—he never had been—but somehow, he always finds himself right in the fucking middle of it, sticking his nose in a place it doesn’t belong, talking shit about things he shouldn’t.

I look at him, unsure if he knows about Sage and me. Knowing if the boys found out from a scumbag like him, Thatcher would be right again—they wouldn’t trust me. Which means I’m going to have to tell them soon or keep hoping those who knew would keep their mouth shut.

But that’s the thing with Ponderosa Springs—nothing stays buried. Not a goddamn thing.

“All alone tonight, East? No meatheads to back you up?” I ask, unconvinced how he can be confident in his safety when he’s stepping

straight into a lion's den. A group of lions that haven't eaten in months and are ready to feed on just about anything.

Even preppy assholes in sneakers.

"I don't need to travel in a constant group like teenage girls going to the bathroom, you know. Unlike you." He starts to walk past us, clicking the unlock button on his car that happens to be parked near my bike, but decides to add another smart-ass remark for good measure, "Soon enough, I'll be cleaning this town of you. All of you. Taking out the trash, just like we did with your slut of a girlfriend. Rose."

My toes are tingling, my tremble getting worse. I bite down on the cigarette in my mouth as my thumb rapidly taps my thigh. My impulsive desires are starting to take over, starting to win.

Hearing him say her name, hearing him allude to some type of involvement, makes our plan of waiting fly out the door for me. I can only control myself for so long before I snap.

Silas moves in his direction silently, carrying the weight of his unfinished business and guilt on his shoulders. I follow, not because he needs backup, but because I want a piece of whatever flesh Si rips from him.

They stand toe-to-toe. "If I find out you had something to do with Rose, Easton, I will make you beg on your knees for me to kill you."

Easton's Adam's apple bobs in his throat as he swallows, his mouth not matching his nervous stature. "Empty fucking threats. You all are fucking full of them. Always have been. When are you going to do something other than talk out of your asses?" He leans in close to Silas's face, making the flint inside of me strike. There's no putting it out now, not until I get what I need.

"You know, if I did have something to do with little Rosie's death," he whispers, "I would've at least tasted the product first to make sure she was worth the heat."

Tick, tick, boom.

There isn't much thought of consequence or repercussion for my actions when I snatch the back of Easton's neck, holding him like a rabbit caught in a trap, feeling his heartbeat spike through the pads of my fingers.

All I can see are bright orange flames and captivating darkness, controlled by nothing but primal instinct.

A film reel of everything crooked he'd ever said or done to me, to my friends, flashes inside my mind. The cruelty towards Rose, the asshole remarks, the times I watched him grope Sage right in front of me.

They are gasoline to my blaze.

Now, the world will see him for what he truly is. He'll be just as disgusting on the outside as he is on the inside. No more hiding behind his golden boy image.

It's time for Easton to be punished.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he shrieks high enough to break glass, trying to push me away, but my grip holds.

"Making good on all those empty fucking threats."

I send my knee into his gut, making him double over with a grunt of pain. I'm not doing it to hurt him, just enough to get leverage so that I could.

He reaches up to my forearm, his nails digging into my body, his weak attempt at defending himself. I jerk his body closer to my bike, practically dragging him the few inches I need him to go. For someone so tough, he sure is wimpy.

"Rook."

I'm not sure who says my name, but it's too late for it. Too late for talking. I'm past that stage, and there's no stopping me. I won't be finished until I feed the evil inside. Until I give him what he deserves.

The devil is getting his fix, delivering punishment.

I shove the left side of his face straight onto my exhaust, plastering him to the side of steaming hot metal. My body buzzes with pleasure when I feel him try to pull away and hear him start to yell in despair.

The smell makes me inhale deeply, and I tilt my head up to the sky as I close my eyes, reveling in this feeling of power. Muscle and tissue being consumed by the heat emit a fragrance like no other. Charcoal and seared hair mix together, making this sulfur scent of skin melting.

I can hear the sizzling of meat on a griddle just below his screams of misery as he begs incoherently for any form of mercy, but he isn't getting any of that here. Not tonight.

I give him another few good seconds before I release my hold, his feet giving out on him so he falls to the asphalt with a hard thud. I watch as his

face rips clean from the exhaust, pieces of his flesh still sticking to the shiny metal.

I make a mental note to clean it.

With shaking hands, he reaches up to try and assess the damage. His skin looks like melted, stringy plastic, the bumbling tissue and oozing yellow liquid from fat being broken down. Major third-degree burns cover his entire cheek. Unfixable damage has now been done.

He'll wear that scar forever, a reminder of just how fucking foul he is below the surface. He'll see it and know there are no more fucking empty threats.

And just like that...

The twitching stops.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

a midsummer night's nightmare

sage

For some reason, I thought when the temperature started to warm up, this place would become less creepy. I think the longer I'm here, the more suspicious it becomes. The creaks in the walls at night, the shadows that seem to appear in the halls when the sun fades—it's hard not to believe this place is haunted or there are secret passageways leading to some cult meeting room.

I walk through the commons, stepping on the moist manicured lawn where students gather between classes or for lunch. My eyes graze the chopped tree in the center, the one that had been cut down after it had mysteriously caught fire last semester.

Once my feet hit the cobblestone path again, I make my way to the theatre.

The place that at one point felt like home.

My panic attacks had been bad over the last couple of days, my nightmares even worse. Now that I know what it really feels like to drown, my mind is using it against me. Everything feels so much more real now.

It took a minute to face Briar and Lyra, and even though Briar insisted she was fine, that what happened wasn't my fault, I still feel this heavy pang of guilt in my stomach every time I catch a glimpse of her yellowish bruise.

I'm trying to forget that night altogether, but it doesn't seem possible.

"Just the girl I was talking about," I hear as I grab ahold of the building's door. "Finn, meet Sage Donahue. This is Frank's daughter. And, Sage this is Finn, my partner."

Cain walks up next to me, getting closer than I would like him to be. I clutch my script tightly to my body as the man next to him addresses me.

“Nice to meet you,” he says, offering his hand. “I’m sorry to hear of your sister’s passing.”

I take his handshake, curious if like in all crime cop shows he is annoyed being paired with a younger detective. His white mustache brushes the top of his lip, curling as it gets to the edges and reminding me of the peanut man.

He has this sort of worn-down leather presence. Like he’s seen a lot, been through even more, but is still good at what he does. Does he know that his partner is not only dirty and working with a sex ring, but also a pedophile?

Would he still work with him? Is this cop just as crooked as the one standing next to him?

“Thank you. It’s nice to meet you,” I say simply, unsure of how much he knows, if he’s involved.

“I’m sure you’re on your way to class, but I wanted to give you my card.” He reaches into the inside of his suit. “In case you hear or see anything that might help us in Greg West’s death and Chris Crawford’s disappearance.”

I take the white rectangle, looking down at the words printed across and biting my bottom lip, trying to keep my thoughts to myself, but I can’t help it.

“Subtle off-white coloring, tastefully thick. It even has a watermark.” I twist the card between my fingers, pocketing it. “Paul Allen would be impressed.”

Finn has a stern exterior, but it breaks as a grin takes over, making him look less *Miami Vice* and more like someone’s grandfather.

“*American Psycho* fan?”

I shake my head. “Movie person. The liberties taken from the novel were necessary, which doesn’t happen often in film adaptations. The satire was beyond its time, a stylized comedy set in the backstabbing, profit-hunting city that is Manhattan.” I swirl my hands around. “And Christian Bale, well, need I say more about his portal of Patrick Bateman?”

“Smart girl.”

I shrug. “Just like movies. I’ll let you know if I hear anything.”

Lie.

“Thanks, Sage,” he replies.

I look over at Cain, nodding my head in acknowledgment. “Cain.”

“Before you go, Pip.” He grabs my forearm, and my knee-jerk reaction is to pull away, but I stay very still. “Your dad told me you hadn’t called since you started school. I know you’re busy, but he misses you. Check in soon, okay?”

I refrain from rolling my eyes. “Yeah, I’ll get right on that.”

Pulling from his grasp, I disappear inside the theatre hall, pressing my back into the closed door and taking a few deep breaths. In through my nose out through my mouth, taking my time and regrouping my thoughts.

This is my time today, and I won’t let that filth ruin it for me. I’d been taking theatre classes, but it had been months since I’d stepped inside of one. Learning about scripts and playwriting at a desk is nothing compared to the real thing.

I pull my shoulders back, silently walking down the aisle, past the wooden rows of seats. The high ceilings are carved with complex designs, built to carry sounds all the way to the back of the auditorium. I reach the side stairs of the stage, my footsteps echoing as I stride across the floor.

The lighting is dim, just enough to see the first few rows from where I stand, but that doesn’t matter. It’s not about the spotlight or even the theatre itself.

It’s the feeling of the vinyl floors beneath the soles of my feet. The way my voice vibrates the wood when I dive into the character. Being absolutely overtaken by a role, by the writing. It sucks you into an entirely new world, away from reality.

I toss my bag to the side and remove my jacket, leaving me exposed in my black dress with a scalloped neckline that pairs nicely with my red suede boots. I’d loved these shoes once upon a time. They were my signature color, and Rosie had bought them for my birthday years ago.

She’d always been so good at giving gifts, able to notice and remember the little things people enjoyed without them even talking about it.

I stand in the middle of the stage, wiggling my toes in my shoes, letting my head fall to the right and back to the left, and stretching before I look down at my script, seeing where I left off reading last night.

A Midsummer Night’s Dream.

Shakespeare.

A king inside the walls of the theatre, he is the blueprint. The one people aspire to be, to surpass when it comes to playwriting.

I reread the scene a few times, absorbing the structure, wanting to encompass all the emotion, the entire character. Closing my eyes, I shed the pieces of myself and rebuild as Hermia. I forget Sage exists and become the girl who is wholeheartedly in love with Lysander, even though her father wishes for her to marry another.

I embody this emotion of a girl so fiercely enthralled with a man she sees as perfect, one that she is not allowed to long for. I feel that ache in my gut, the longing for a person's soul, more than just their physical attributes or what they give me materialistically.

When I reopen my eyes, I'm no longer the insane twin.
I'm Hermia.

How now, my love? Why is your cheek so pale? How chance the roses there do fade so fast?

I hear Lysander in my head, playing his part, his body more of a loose figure than an actual person.

“Belike for want of rain, which I could well beteem them from the tempest of my eyes.”

Old English is simple, when you read enough of it. It's so simple for her to just say *the color is gone because I am saying it is, but I could make the roses regrow from the tears I've cried for our love*. But it's so much more fun to encode it, to read between the lines of romantic vocabulary.

Ay me! For aught that I could ever read, could ever hear by tale or history, the course of true love never did run smooth. But, either it was different in blood—

“O cross! Too high to be enthralled to low.” I throw my hands dramatically, a sly grin on my face as we banter back and forth on everyone else's requirements for love. The rules for the heart, when in truth, the only thing that should never have rules is love.

Or else misgraффed in respect of years.

Oh spite! Too old to be engaged to young

“Or else it stood upon choice of friends.”

Oh hell! To choose love by another's eyes.

The scene goes deeper, speaking about how quickly love can be destroyed by the ones around you. By the expectations set by your family

and friends. How we are expected to marry within our own societal standards. That if you must be with someone that is just right for you in the eyes of the world. Not too young, not too old.

It's the tale of star-crossed lovers in a different setting, a different space. But the pain, it's still the same. The sting of wanting what you can never, ever have.

It's a sting I know. A sting so sharp that I start to crack through Hermia's character. My pain, as Sage, flows within the act.

Steal forth thy father's house to-morrow night; And in the wood, a league without the town, Where I did meet thee once with Helena, To do observance to a morn of May—There will I stay for thee.

Lysander makes a plan to meet with me so that we can run away together. Free to be with one another for the rest of our lives, away from what everyone wants, away from my father that needs me to marry Demetrius, the man who will give me wealth and status. A man my soul refuses to love.

I'm no longer on this stage. I'm still in an auditorium, but it's the one at my high school. I'm there with Rook, being confronted by his anger after he'd found out about Easton and me, about the engagement. Everything is the same, the knives in my chest as he begged me to tell him I was lying, that it was some misunderstanding. All of those feelings are here and alive, swirling around me.

Except it's different. This time, instead of lying, instead of ripping his heart to shreds with my vicious lies, I tell him the truth. I tell him what I always wanted to say—that I was forced into an engagement to protect my sister, all for nothing.

“My good Lysander! I swear to thee, by Cupid’s strongest bow, By his best arrow with the golden head, By the simplicity of Venus’ doves, By that which knitteth souls and prospers loves, And by that fire which burned the Carthage queen.” I pause, the scene so visceral, too real. It's taking my breath away.

I shake my head, taking a breath and continuing. “When the false Troyan under sail was seen, By all the vows that ever men have broke, In number more than ever women spoke, In that same place thou hast appointed me.” I pause again, my voice cracking,

“To-morrow truly will I meet with thee.”

Hermia promises to meet him so they can run off together, a promise I wish I could have given to Rook. Words I wish I could've said. It hurts that I couldn't say how I was really feeling, that I couldn't give him my truths when it mattered most.

They say you never truly realize how much you care about a person until they're gone.

And when he was gone? He took me with him.

But the smoke stayed.

It lingered, filling the hollow spaces.

The me I'd always wanted to be, he owned it, and I know I'll never get it back.

Thinking of him, putting myself back there, makes my senses tingle. I can smell him again or rather, the smoke. I can smell weed, fruity and musky, assaulting my nose.

There is a sudden clap, a loud thunderous sound that takes me away from the scene, away from the past, and plows me right back into reality.

"Glad to know you still know how to lie." His voice makes me shiver.
"Sorry, act."

I squint, searching the seats for his face, finding his shadow near the back, but he's making his way up the aisle, coming closer to the light.

My gut twists when I see the cut on his lip. One that isn't from Alistair or his father but me. I'd done that to him. While I was drowning in self-pity and rage, I'd taken it out on him, on Silas. And Rook, he let me. He let me hurt him.

A rolled blunt sits on his lips, the smoke swirling around his head as he stands at the front of the stage, looking up at me. The way his hair has grown out makes me want to measure it with my fingers. It's tucked neatly behind his ears but still looks wild.

"What do you want from us?"

Straightforward and directly to the point.

Foolish of me to think he'd be here for any other reason than to question my motives.

"I already told you. I want to help catch Frank. I'll do whatever you guys need. I want him gone. Once that's finished, I'll be out of here," I answer truthfully.

"And what? I'm just supposed to take your word for it?"

“Silas did.”

This makes him halt.

After the Gauntlet, Silas showed up at my dorm to talk. I’d apologized for the things I said about Rose. I know it wasn’t his fault, but I needed to blame someone in that moment. It had been selfish of me to do that. He’d gone on to tell me that I’m already involved even if he doesn’t like it. That he’d rather me help them than do it myself and get myself killed. Because obviously, the people we’re up against don’t care about killing innocent women.

He’d agreed to my terms, allowed me to be a part of the future plans. But he made it very clear that after Frank is dead, I have to leave. He doesn’t want me here.

I don’t want me here either.

And while I’m sure Thatcher and Alistair weren’t happy about it, they supported his decision. But not Rook.

“Silas is letting his guilt cloud his judgment,” he assures me. “Silas doesn’t know you’re a snake in the grass. That you’re always playing a part. He doesn’t know you. Not like I do.”

I know there’s no way to mend what had been broken between the two of us—the damage had been done. But I’m tired of pretending to hate him, even if he truly does despise me.

I’m still angry that I never got more of him, and I’d given him all of me. But I don’t hate him. I never did.

There isn’t any way I could.

For a long time, I thought hating him would be easier. It was a way to keep his fire close to my heart. A way for me to avoid mourning the loss of him, of us. Now, I’m just too tired to fake it. To fake anything.

I don’t want to be at each other’s throats the entire time I’m involved, especially considering he’s still adamant about keeping what we were from his friends.

I sigh heavily and walk to the edge of the stage, where I drop down into a sitting position. My legs dangle over the side, and I rub my hands up and down my thighs before I say, “What do you need to hear from me, Rook? What do I need to say so that this is as painless as possible?”

He pulls the blunt from his mouth, wetting his dry mouth with his tongue. “Nothing between us will ever be painless, Sage.” His eyes burn me.

“But you could start by telling me who that was you were talking to before you came in here.”

I scoff, shaking my head. “Stalking me now?” I arch my eyebrow in question.

“No, I happened to be around. I just find it suspicious that you show back up here, magically released from a psych ward that your father put you in.” He blows a smoke ring in my direction, tilting his head. “Now you’re chatting it up with two guys who look a lot like feds.”

I think about telling him, right now, but even if I did, he wouldn’t believe me. I think he would believe that story less than the lie I’m about to tell. Anything and everything I tell Rook Van Doren will never be taken as the truth.

Ever again.

“They’re friends of my father’s. I think they’re on the board here. We just ran into each other, and they said hello. Is that alright with you? Am I allowed to say hello to people? Or are you just jealous?”

I shouldn’t be so snarky towards him, not when I know why he’s asking, but I can’t help it. I can’t help but test this irrational theory that his asking stems from some form of jealousy.

He tongues his cheek, breathing deeply through his nose as he steps a little closer to me. His body brushes against my kneecaps.

“Jealous? Of what exactly? A girl I used to fuck? If that were the case, I’d be jealous of just about every female on campus.”

Through the haze of the smoke, I see his irises.

Hellfire eyes.

So fucking bright and always burning.

It makes his comment prick even more. Knowing he’s looked at other girls with those eyes, been inside of them, and more than that, they’ve touched him. That makes me ill.

Thinking of them running their fingers across his collarbone and asking where he got that scar. I wonder if he tells them the truth.

That at one point he thought we were soul mates and tried to force fate into agreeing with us. That there’s a matching one on a girl he used to care about.

“Well, if that’s all, then you can leave. I answered your question.” I press my hands into the floor, ready to push myself up so I can grab my

things, but he brings me to a halt.

His palm snaps against my thigh, fingers hooking through my dress and sinking into my skin. I gasp at how high up he is, his middle finger brushing the inner portion of my naked thigh beneath my dress.

Dangerously close to a place he hasn't touched in nearly a year.

"I'll leave when I want, and you'll leave when I tell you to, yeah?" He tightens his jaw, laying the faded blunt beside me. "I came here to let you know that I'm watching you."

"You watch all the girls you've fucked?"

"Just the ones who are a threat to my family."

There is an indescribable throbbing in my chest. I wrecked him so fucking hard that he genuinely believes I would do something to hurt his friends. When he says family, he is referring to the guys. They are the only family he has ever known.

And I'm a danger to them.

"Rook—"

"Pyro, remember?" he interjects, looking me up and down slowly. "That's what you used to call me when you thought I was a psycho with mommy issues who was going to kill you."

That still might be true, I think to myself. Actually, that is definitely still true.

"I know better now," I mutter. "I know you better."

His grip tightens in anger, his body closing in on my own as he forces his way between my thighs. They clench on instinct, my core starting to ache at the heat he's radiating. The flash of his Zippo catches the light, and in seconds, a hot orange flame shoots from the top.

I tense up. With Rook, you never know what is racing through his mind, what he will do on a whim just because he feels like it.

"You think I won't kill you?" he asks rhetorically, his left hand crawling higher up my thigh, shoving the material of my dress up and revealing my red panties. The flimsy lace material is the only thing hiding my already wet center from him. "You think I won't burn you alive if I sense even an ounce of betrayal from you?"

"I—"

"I will not hesitate to bury you for good this time, Sage. In a hole so fucking deep, you will never be able to crawl out," he continues, meaning

every single word.

I jerk away from him or try to when he pulls the side fabric of my underwear away from my body. He stays in place, his hand holding me painfully still. He's so close, his smell all around me. And God, his eyes—they're incinerating me, never wavering from my concerned gaze.

What is he doing? What is he doing to me?

My mind and body are at odds.

My body, which had received nothing but pleasure from him in the past, trusts him, but my mind knows just how far he's willing to go for revenge.

“What are you—”

My heart jumps to my throat as he drags the searing Zippo flame towards the material, barely touching it with the blaze before it snaps cleanly in two. I feel the heat from the fire against the sensitive skin of my hip. It's soothed almost instantly when he pulls it away, the cool air aiding the sting.

“If you double-cross us, if you put my friends at risk, if you jeopardize them, I will ruin you. Just like I should have a year ago. I let you get out unscathed last time. Never again.”

I think he's done. I want him to be done—it's killing me having him so close. I can taste him on my tongue, and yet, I can't touch him. But I also missed having him this close. I thought so many nights about having him this close.

“I'm—” I choke out as he shifts his fingers to the other side of my body, dipping one finger between my body and my underwear, playing with it. “I'm not the same person I was then. I changed inside there. It was—”

Snap.

He lets go of the fabric, making it crack against me. I suck my bottom lip inside my mouth, biting down on it hard.

“Save me the sob story. Poor little sweetheart Sage locked inside a looney bin—get the hell over it. Welcome to the trauma club.” His words almost pack a harder punch than his actions.

He's playing with me, pulling me in just so he can drop me on my face.

I know that. I know what he's doing.

But I still want it.

I want whatever he gives me because this feels good. Even when I know it would end in him leaving, still bitter towards me.

It is so good. Too good.

The way his angry breath splays across my lips, how his fingers return to my panties, grazing my flesh just enough to make me all hot and breathy.

He may think he doesn't know me, that I lied. But Rook, he knew my body.

That was the one thing that could never lie to him, even if it wanted to.

But I'm also not the girl who would ever lie down and take it. When it comes to him, my fight always comes out to play with his demons.

"You have no fucking clue what I went through inside that place, Van Doren. Don't act like I had it easy in there. While you were out, free, trying to fuck me out of your memory."

That Zippo comes dangerously close to my skin, so close that the burn is starting to hurt. He presses his face into my forehead aggressively, rolling his tongue across his teeth.

"Now who's jealous?"

I feel the material of my panties give, and now both sides lie flaccid on the stage. My core is naked and so very close to his body. I shiver as the air brushes my extremely sensitive clit.

"Did you cry when you were in there?" he asks. "Was it scary for you, TG? Surrounded by all those crazy people, trapped somewhere you didn't belong? Was it awful?"

Now he's patronizing me.

Being a condescending prick.

I grind my teeth, lifting my head a little, brushing his nose with my own.

"I bet you wanted out. Begged to escape and when you couldn't. You'd lie inside those four white walls, staring at the ceiling, fantasizing about all those times I was nine inches deep inside your cunt, didn't you?"

His body moves, making contact with my center, and I try to muffle the moan, but it doesn't work very well. A little whimper falls from my lips, my hips jerking, seeking more friction from him, needing some form of release.

“Yeah, I know you did. I bet you even slipped those fingers between your pale thighs and made yourself come thinking of my tongue on your pussy.”

The way he speaks is so vulgar, but coming from his mouth, it sounds like music. Caressing my body all over, wrapping me up with passion,

Rook is an aphrodisiac. From his hard glare to his steamy scent, he is intoxicating.

Walking sex.

You look at him, and he doesn’t have to say it, but you know he knows just how to fuck you. How to reach that spot no one else can.

I try to lift my hips closer, but it’s then he chooses to back up, removing himself from me completely, leaving me feeling hollow again. He plucks the blunt up from beside me, relighting it before pocketing his Zippo.

“Good,” he says as he inhales, “I’m glad you remember. I’m glad you thought about it, because that’s all you’ll ever get from me, Sage.”

Releasing the smoke from his lungs, he stares at me hard, retreating up the aisle.

“Memories.”

It’s not until he exits the doors that I breathe again.

And I also realize, my torn panties?

Are nowhere to be found.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

devil's backbone

rook

“Come on, Silas, pick up.”

The dial tone just keeps going and going until I get the same result—a voicemail message telling me his inbox is too full.

“Goddammit.”

I stare down at the multiple texts I’ve sent that have yet to be replied to.

Dread boils inside my gut.

When I left class and went to our dorm to find him gone, I knew something was wrong. Something wasn’t right, and although for some people it’s normal to ghost their friends every once in a while, he always lets me know where he is headed.

He knows what it does to me when I don’t know.

When I’m left with my own mind for too long.

Neither Alistair nor Thatcher had heard from him all day, and with the anniversary of Rosemary’s death only a few days away, I’m convinced he’s doing something he shouldn’t.

Something that he might not regret but would be the end of me.

And maybe that makes me a selfish fucking friend, knowing he wants to die but not letting him. I just...I can’t do it.

I can’t let him go like that.

I shove my hat on backwards, tucking my helmet beneath my arm as I jog towards my bike. I notice right away there are two people standing near it, inspecting it, and they shouldn’t be. I hate when people touch my bike.

“Can I fucking help you?” I bite out, irritated with the world.

Worried about Silas.

Pissed about Sage.

These assholes are going to get the blunt end of my frustration.

They both turn to face me. One is distinctly older than the other, sporting a gray porn stash and a dull gray suit that doesn't fit him properly. Government wages—they're a bitch.

He looks hardened, like he won't be too keen on the attitude I plan on giving him. Which, of course, makes me want to up the ante.

The other one looks about my father's age, maybe a little younger, wearing a gun around his waist. A grown-up frat boy with a weapon—how charming. Although, I would be more afraid of a hungry toddler than him.

"Just admiring your wheels," the younger one says. "I'm Detective McKay, and this is my partner, Detective Breck."

He reaches into his jacket, retrieving a flashy badge, "FBI" written in large letters at the top.

There could be a multitude of reasons as to why they're here waiting for me. I'd done a lot of illegal things in the last few years,

but if I have to guess, it's because Easton didn't keep his mouth shut.

After I'd burned the side of his cheek off, he'd cried and screamed about telling his father. How we were all going to rot in prison. But Alistair informed him that if he told anyone, the entire town would find out that Easton's mom still pays visits to Alistair's dad.

A Sinclair family secret that they had no clue we knew about, and if that got out? It would ruin the dean's reputation for good. They couldn't have a man who barely kept his wife in check being in charge of the great minds of the future, could they?

He'd lose his position. The money. Their name.

It would all melt away just like Easton's flesh, and that was the last thing he wanted.

But apparently, it hadn't been enough to scare him.

"So a badge means you can search my property without a warrant?" I arch my eyebrow.

Having a lawyer as a father has its perks. I would be the first to admit it.

Were those perks worth what happened behind closed doors with my old man? Absolutely fucking not.

"Didn't know you were taking up law, following in the old man's footsteps?"

My jaw ticks as I eye McKay carefully. Was that a dig? It's not like he would know about my relationship with my father, but the way he's staring at me tells me it was more than a random comment.

I'm not in the mood to play this good cop/bad cop bullshit. I don't have the time for it. If they're going to arrest me, they need to get on with it.

"If you have something to ask me, I suggest you ask it."

"You like fire, Rook?" The older guy, Detective Breck, addresses me for the first time. I can feel his eyes searing into my skull, so I turn my attention to him. I meet his gaze, unmoving, giving him what he wants—a challenge.

If he thinks he's intimidating me, he can think again.

I arch my eyebrow, rolling the match in my mouth to the left side. "Fire is one of the most life-changing discoveries. I recognize when something needs a certain...appreciation."

"I think you do a little more than appreciate it." He reaches into the inside of his suit, pulling out a small Ziplock baggie. "You want to tell me why we found this at St. Gabriel's church?"

I look at the contents, containing what used to be my favorite Zippo. The fire had turned the shiny metal into a charcoal stain. The wheel had melted completely off, and the top is detached. But I can still faintly see *RVD* carved into the front.

"So that's where it went," I say sarcastically. "I mean, I've regularly attended that place since I was a kid. Must've fallen from my pocket."

I stare at the engraving a little harder.

RVD.

I would do just about anything to hear Rose call me that again. Even if it was just one time.

I'd burnt down that church after her death. After her funeral, where it was held. Where they refused to abide by Rosie's wishes. She never wanted to be buried; she wanted to be cremated and given to the people who loved her.

But her parents were convinced by St. Gabriel's that it was an eternal sin. So her piece-of-shit hypocrite of a father, who'd been the reason she died, buried her in the ground. All of those people crowded inside the cathedral, holding tissues, crying bogus-ass tears.

They didn't even fucking know her. They didn't even like her.

All of those people inside that church had no clue just how special Rosie was because half of them hadn't spoken a word to her. Yet, her friends, the ones who knew her fears and her dreams, they weren't allowed to come inside.

We had been banned from her funeral, from her burial. The man who loved her more than life wasn't able to say goodbye.

My thumb twitches.

That hurt, that bitterness, it starts to fill me up again, and if given the chance, I would torch that place all over again. I just wish they all would've gone down in flames with it.

I can feel my toes curling. I can smell the fabric inside melting. Watching as the foundation fell apart piece by piece underneath the heat of the fire. I felt like a child standing in front of a campfire, letting it warm me.

Every memory I had with Rose danced in the smoke like a hologram. And when the smoke cleared, so did she.

When the fire hit its peak, I tossed the lighter in with it, because I didn't want another reminder that I'd never hear "RVD" ever again.

"So you just dropped it? It wouldn't have anything to do with the fire that happened there a year ago?"

"The FBI is investigating fires now?"

So they aren't here about Easton, but I highly doubt they're here to just talk to me about a fire.

They're baiting me.

"Most people like you would have used gasoline." Breck chooses his words carefully. Everything he says is methodical, and I'm hyperaware that he wants to get me riled up.

He wants me to be impulsive, push me past the point of caring. Because as much as I hate it, pyromaniacs are predictable in their unpredictability.

"People like me?" I bite into the bait, like a fish on a hook, giving him what he wants from me.

"Little boys with mommy issues who think the world is to blame for all their problems and deal with it by setting fires. How old were you when your mom died? Six or seven? Did the urges start before or after?"

There is something I respect about a man willing to speak how he feels without fear of repercussion. I smirk, enjoying the way he stands there

thinking he has me all figured out.

My fascination with fire is something I've always had—always standing too close to the fireplace, playing with matches. I was born with that desire; my mother's death was only confirmation of it.

But what he doesn't take into consideration is there is no one who does pyromania quite like me.

"Whoa, did you come up with that all by yourself?"

Breck scolds me with his eyes, probably annoyed with my lack of reaction, with my attitude.

"Arson is three years in prison, smartass, you know that?"

I sigh, grabbing my helmet from beneath my shoulder and tugging it onto my head. I walk closer towards my bike, towards them.

The longer I stand here pussyfooting with them, the more time Silas is out there alone.

"Good thing I didn't do anything, then."

"Listen." McKay puts his hand on my shoulder as I sling my leg over my bike, straddling the seat. "We don't care if you did it or not. We don't want you. You're a good kid with a bright future, straight A's your first semester. That a tough thing to do at Hollow Heights."

I look down at his hand, rolling my tongue on the inside of my cheek as I look back up at him.

"We don't care about you. We want to know about Thatcher Pierson."

The match in my mouth snaps clean in two, the abrupt grind of my jaw too much force on the weak twig.

Thatcher?

If they want to come after me, fine. I can take this kind of heat, especially when I know they don't have a leg to stand on. But coming for them isn't going to happen.

I would take the blame for it all before something happened to any of them.

"Don't we all," I say, shrugging his hand off my body. "How about this. You and your ancient-ass partner go to hell, yeah?"

I turn the key over on my bike, but it only runs for a few seconds before Breck leans over and hits the kill switch, making my jaw tighten.

"Cut the shit, punk. You want to go to prison for arson, I'm fine with that. We're giving you an out here. A witness has come forward, saying

Thatcher was involved in Greg West's murder, and all we wanna know is if there is any truth to that."

A witness?

To a crime that was committed in the middle of nowhere?

Bull-fucking-shit.

If that were true, they would have seen all of us there. They wouldn't just want to know about Thatch. Which leads me to believe they're playing a guessing game.

They found a body all cut up and went with the guy whose father was known for the same kind of crimes, trying to see if the apple fell close to the tree.

Wait. Wait a minute.

Realization hits me like a bus.

It took me longer than I would have liked, but I know these two. They're the same men I saw Sage talking to outside of the theatre the other day.

Witness? You mean a dirty, fucking snitch.

Once a liar, always a liar.

"You want the truth?" I offer, nodding my head. "If you touch me or my bike again, I'll break your fucking hands. You don't have shit on me or anyone else. You got me on arson, then here." I hold my hands out. "Arrest me."

You could hear a pin drop as both of them stand there staring at me, hard as statues as they try to figure out another way to get me to talk.

"That's what I thought. I'm done here. The next time you want to talk, do it with my lawyer."

I turn the key, revving the engine loudly and pulling my wrist back to warmup the engine before pulling out of the parking lot, leaving them behind me.

My mind is racing, anger throbbing in my veins.

I knew we shouldn't have trusted her. I knew it didn't feel right, that she was lying. I tried to convince Silas not to let her be a part of anything, but he was insistent.

I pull the throttle hard when I drive from the gates of Hollow Heights.

I need to make sure Silas is okay right now, that he's alright.

And then I'll deal with Sage.



I don't believe in Heaven or Hell.

Which is an odd revelation for the guy everyone believes is the product of worshiping Satan.

I believe when we die, we die. That's it.

We cease to exist, and we begin to decay until we are nothing but another piece of the Earth.

There is no eternal damnation or heavenly gates.

Just darkness.

That's what I believe.

However, my mom didn't think that.

She would drag me to the cemetery every holiday, every birthday, to pay my respects to the grandparents I'd never even met. Because she believed that visiting graves was a way to let the dead know we hadn't forgotten about them in the land of the living.

By making me go, it was her way of passing on their memory, in hopes that I would one day do the same with my children, so that even though they were long gone, their memory stayed breathing.

She'd be sad to know that I don't visit my grandparents anymore. I stopped when she died, but I do visit her, and I visit Rosie.

My mother was buried in my father's family cemetery, but Rose was buried at the Ponderosa Springs' local one. Where they leave all the bodies of this town to decay.

Everything is wet.

The ground is dense beneath my shoes, and the air feels moist when I inhale, all the fog that seems to stick to my clothes leaving water residue. The fog rolls with the hills, weaving in and out of the unremembered graves like a wool blanket.

Visitors are sparse during this time of the day, right before nightfall when the sun is starting to set. Personally, I think that's the best time to go.

It feels almost like the land of the living is retreating and those far passed are waking up.

Silas's back is towards me, resting against her tombstone, a bouquet of peonies on the ground next to him.

The worry falls off my shoulders because I know he's breathing. He's alive.

But the ache doesn't leave because I know he is hurting.

"You are here some days," I hear him whisper, his voice cracked from sorrow. "I can feel you, smell you in the air. I hear your laugh in my ears and turn around expecting you to be there, but you aren't. Not the way I want you to be. Sometimes at night, I see you and we talk, but I know it's not really you. It's my mind playing tricks."

I swallow nervously, knowing this isn't the time to grill him about his medication, but I won't let this disease take him. Not when I know with the right treatment he can live a long life.

"They like to see me in pain. So they send me visions of you. They feed off my pain, baby. And they get stronger every single day I'm here without you. They are trying to get out." He presses his hands into the sides of his head. "And I don't know how to stop them anymore. So, I need you to come back, okay? Please, I just need you to come back. Baby, I need you to save me."

His head drops down, and his shoulders shake, vibrating with the weight of his sadness.

It's then I step up next to him, falling onto the wet ground and letting it soak through my jeans. He doesn't have to look up to know I'm here. He feels my presence.

I look over at her tombstone, my eyes burning with emotion.

Rosemary Paige Donahue

Beloved daughter, sister, and friend.

It's been cleaned recently, the white marble bright compared to the more weather-eroded markers. A little glimpse at just how much light she put into the world when she was in it.

How had it been a year without her?

I think we'd filled our lives with so much chaos to prevent the ache of her loss, and today, we were forced to stop, to reflect on the person we'd lost.

Right now, I'm compelled to pull back the bandages I'd slapped over that emotional wound, only to find it still raw and nasty. There is no healing,

still just a dirty gash across my soul.

It's hard to think of anything other than the pain. I can't think about Frank or Sage, only this melancholy feeling that suffocates me.

Death is inevitable, and I always knew that. It's a rite of passage, but you think of it happening when you're older. Death when you are this young, it's nothing but a sick, sick tragedy. It's an entirely different form of mourning.

Silas lifts his head, looking up at the sky, and I see the tears tracking his face.

"Rose, come back!" He screams a scream that makes chill bumps rise on my skin. It's his heart begging for her. Pleading for her. "Why didn't you take me with you?" he cries. "I would've gone with you."

I lay my arm around his shoulder, tugging him closer to my side and wrapping him up in my arms.

I feel his body shaking from the screams, the shouts that ricochet off my body over and over again. And I absorb every single one of them.

That's all I can do. All I can do is hold him as he sits there reliving the nightmare from a year ago. One we are all still waiting to wake up from.

I recall the agony I felt when I helped Alistair pull him away from her body, watching him carry her one last time to the ambulance.

How after it only got worse. So much fucking worse.

I sat outside his door, feeling useless, just listening desperately for the sound of his breath. Anything that would tell me he was alive. I couldn't take it anymore. I was standing out there waiting on him to die.

When I broke the door down, splintering the hinges, I found him lying on his back.

Nothing in his room had been touched; he'd just walked inside and laid on the floor. That's where he had been, on the floor with one of her jackets balled up to his chest. He hadn't even changed out of the clothes he'd worn when we found her.

And he was just mumbling, about everything and anything. Muttering to himself, like he was having a conversation with his own mind.

I forced him into the shower. I made him eat and shoved his meds down his throat. I did that for weeks, until he was able to do it on his own again.

I would do it again, I would do it all over again for him because I'm not losing him too.

I'm keeping him. I'm keeping all of the boys.

I had lost too many people that I cared about, and I'm not losing any more.

"How long have you been out here?" I ask, speaking for the first time once his shoulders stop shaking.

"Since you left for class. I wanted to watch the sunrise with her, but I was late." He swallows. "I'm always too fucking late."

"Silas, you know I'd never lie to you, so I'm not going to say it gets easier from here. But I know over time, you will heal. It won't be so sharp like it is right now."

"I think that might be worse." He lifts his head, staring at me. "Time doesn't heal. It helps you forget, and she doesn't deserve to be forgotten. Ten years from now, am I going to remember how she smelled? Or what she looked like when she smiled? No. She'll become a memory, and she was more than a memory, Rook."

That's what grief is. It's a double-edged sword.

"I know she was. And she'll always be more to us. We'll get through it, together. We always get through it."

Silence passes through, a breeze sweeping around us, and I watch as one of the petals from the peonies gets picked up by the wind.

It floats in the air, flowing with the current.

Free and with wings.

And I think that's Rosie's way of telling us we will get through it and that she's okay.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

double-edge sword

sage

Every day out of the year is a bad day for someone.

June twenty-fourth could be your birthday, the best day of your life, and somewhere across the world, someone is being murdered.

October tenth could be the day you got married or engaged. A day you couldn't dream up any better. Yet, three houses down, there is a little girl who lost her parents to a car crash.

Your best day will always equal someone's worst.

I'd never really thought of that before. I don't think a lot of people do until they experience it for themselves.

April twenty-ninth went from a normal day, usually sunny, mostly spent in school, a day that I would fly past and move forward from without a second thought, to being one I'll never forget.

Today, the split in my soul aches a little harder. The nerves that had been severed throb for connection. My brain reminds me a little more persistently that the person I came into this world with is gone.

I went to her grave this morning and saw someone had already left peonies, her favorite flower, but I decided to leave the ones I'd bought as well. She deserves all the flowers. I wanted to sit, to stay and talk. To update her on my life, but everything felt so negative, and I didn't wanna burden her with that.

How silly. I didn't want to burden a tombstone with my problems.

I wanted to stay there, close my eyes, and feel as if we were under the covers in her bed. Chatting about our lives, laughing, dreaming of our futures. I wanted to feel that connection I had when she was alive.

But I just couldn't do it. I couldn't feel her there.

It was just a headstone with her name on it. There was no Rose.

I thought, maybe I'm broken? You're supposed to feel something at the graveyard, right? So if I couldn't feel her there, where was I going to? Was I ever going to feel that bond again?

That's what today felt like. Constantly searching for her and knowing that I was never going to find her.

I push the door to my dorm open, thankful that my roommate is in class. It means I'll be able to curl up in my bed and cry with no one asking any questions. Flipping my shoes off carelessly, I walk to my bed and crawl under my blankets.

I turn my body towards the wall and let out a shaky breath I didn't notice I'd been holding in. The tears fall slowly, dripping onto the white sheets. I'm a bundle of different emotions, all of them swirling around inside of me like a child finger painting.

Guilt. Sadness. Anger.

But the one that hit the heaviest was unworthy.

I'd been the shitty twin. I was the one with the baggage, the one that was jaded and mean. I didn't deserve life, and Rose did. She would have done so much more with her future than I was going to. Her dreams were brighter, more achievable than mine.

The world stopped when she died. And if it had been me, it would've continued to spin.

It should've been me.

That's what I'd screamed to my father after I watched that video. When I saw him pick Rosemary so easily over me.

It should've been me.

And because he chose wrong, I decided he didn't get to keep his meal ticket. He took her from me, so I was going to take his money from him.

I'd originally planned on killing him after I saw it, but I wanted him to suffer. I wanted him to know this pain, to live out his days broke, hungry, and empty.

So I confronted him in our living room and did the thing that got me sent away. It was convenient for him, the perfect excuse to lock me up and keep me quiet. But I hadn't expected to live. I'd read that if you did it a certain way, there would be no way to survive it.

The vertical scars down both of my wrists pulsed.

Apparently, I hadn't done enough because the doctors were able to stitch me up just before sending me off strapped to a stretcher. I wanted to die because Rose wasn't here, because it felt unfair for us to not be here together, because my father had no right to choose something like that.

Now, I'm left with these scars as a reminder that I couldn't even die correctly. I spent a lot of time in the psych ward planning on getting out and paying my father back for what he had done, conjuring up ways to destroy him, because I realized he would do anything for money.

Even if I had succeeded in killing myself, he would have still continued to do gruesome things to stay at the top of the Ponderosa Springs' food chain.

The only way to stop him was to kill him, and I couldn't wait for that day.

A sob erupts from my chest, pouring from me like venom. It burns and rips my throat as it builds up. I place my hand over my mouth, shaking as I cry, and the tears leak a little faster.

This harsh reality I never wanted to accept hit like a train today.

It's this realization that you're older than your twin. This monumental stab in the gut because it's been 365 days without her. That's a birthday, a Christmas, all of these memories she never got to create. Another reminder that when she died, I did too. I just happened to keep existing.

"Sage?"

I roll over in my bed, looking at the door.

Lyra and Briar are standing in the archway, holding a bag of candies and movies in their hands.

"You said you liked *Sixteen Candles*, right? We couldn't remember if you said sour Skittles or regular, so we just got both," Lyra says, wiggling the bag in the air.

"How did you get in here?"

Briar lifts a bobby pin from her pocket. "These locks are a breeze and..."

Reaching inside her the front of her plaid button-up, she pulls out a blunt. "I nabbed this from Rook the other day."

Even though I really don't want to, I smile a little.

"Little thief is starting to make sense now," I tell her.

She shrugs. “My thievery has started to become pretty handy around here.”

I run my hand beneath my nose, wiping the snot and tears that had fallen there. They both look so hopeful, coming in here intent on cheering me up, or at the very least giving me a break from the sorrow.

They know what today is.

“Thank you, guys, but I’m not really in the mood. I figured you all would be with the guys.”

“They’re spending the weekend at Silas’s parents’ cabin in Portland. They needed some time, needed a space to be somewhere with Silas. And we thought...” Briar looks at Lyra for help.

“We thought we could do the same for you,” she finishes for her.

“I just—” I hum, trying not to cry anymore, hating this feeling of being too vulnerable. “I just think I need to be alone today. There isn’t much that I think will make this better, not today.”

I think that’s why I enjoy acting. Being on the stage, I can release my emotions freely through a character, and no one questions it because they think it’s just a part of the script. I can be vulnerable, soft, gentle.

Not this constantly snarky, bitter person.

“We know we can’t make it better. That’s not the point.” Lyra steps farther into my room. “It’s about not letting you be sad, alone. About making it more bearable. I don’t know what it feels like to lose a twin, but I did lose my mom.”

I look over at her, at the understanding in her eyes. Not pity or sympathy, but a mutual knowledge of similar pain.

“No one can bring them back. No matter how badly we want it. But you don’t have to feel that alone. We don’t have to talk about her, or we can. We will do whatever you want today, even if you just want us to sit here with you in silence. I went through the death of my mother all alone, with no one to be there for me, and I refuse to let you do that to yourself. Not when you have us here.”

Friendship.

It had always been a foreign concept to someone like me.

A girl who was taught that the relationships you keep close to you are only to push you further in life. It’s never about the actual connection. I was always just a pawn in people’s lives, used for what I could bring them.

No one was ever with me because I was Sage.

No one was ever friends with me because I was Sage.

They were involved with me for my status, for my name, my money.

And here I am, with none of those things, and these two girls are choosing to be my friends anyway. Despite what being close to me will cause people to say about them.

Someone is choosing me for me.

They see me the same way Rosemary always did—as the girl who was more than her reputation.

“You said you brought *Sixteen Candles*?” I ask gently.

Briar smiles. “And *Can’t Buy Me Love!*”

We decide that moving down the hall to their room would be better, considering my roommate could walk in at any time and try to kick us out. But I do something I don’t ever do—I let them in.

I let them be there for me in their own way.

Together, we move Briar and Lyra’s beds together, shift the TV to the middle of the room, and crack a window. All of us pile up on the mattresses, turn the first movie on, and light Rook’s stolen blunt.

I haven’t smoked since the last time I hung out with Rook, which was more than a year ago. The effects of the weed hit me strongly. I eat more food than I have in months, and God, I laugh.

Real laughter that I haven’t experienced since I was very little.

We laugh because Lyra is that philosophical person when she is stoned. She talks about bugs, of course, about how their lives affect our day-to-day existence, which turns into the creation of human life and religion.

I find out so much about both of them in these moments.

The way they see the world, how they feel about certain issues, their passions.

It feels odd having a day like this. How amongst all this darkness and chaos, we’re able to create something good and light.

There are times when the guilt would attack me, trying to rear its ugly head.

How could you enjoy this day? When you know everything it represents?

But I try to think of Rosemary, how she wouldn’t want me to be depressed in my room alone. I think about what she wanted for me in life,

that she would want me to be happy even if it's without her.

I think about how I would feel if the roles were reversed.

I wouldn't want her to suffer. I would want her to experience joy, laughter, love, even on the day I died.

"So listen," Briar announces, rolling onto her stomach and popping a piece of chocolate into her mouth. "You don't have to tell me, but I really gotta know. What's up with you and Van Doren?"

I'm high, and the last person in the world I want to think of right now is him.

I swallow the mouthful of Skittles I have, glancing over at her nonchalantly. "What do you mean?"

She raises both eyebrows at me. "I was born at night, but not last night, Sage."

"That little pep talk he gave you in the backseat after the Gauntlet seemed pretty heated from what I could tell," Lyra adds, twirling the stem of her cherry around in the air.

"He was just—" I pause. "He was just getting me away from Silas. I said some fucked-up things to him. If it hadn't been Rook to do it, it would've been Alistair or Thatcher."

I don't want to lie to them about him, but what would I tell them? I have no words to describe what Rook and I were. I've never spoken about us out loud to anyone, and I wouldn't even know how to start.

They look at each other for a moment before Briar speaks up.

"He looks at you like he's in physical pain. I don't think he notices that he does it, but it hurts him to look at you."

I'm sure to her, it looks like pain. Like twisted-up hurt.

At one point, he looked at me with longing and need, with desire and passion, but now it's just hatred.

"It's not pain," I say. "It's disgust. Rook hates me, and that's about the only emotion he feels towards me now."

"Now? So there was a before?"

I blow out a breath, running both hands through my hair and letting them cradle my neck as I look down at the bed. I could tell them, right? They won't say anything. I mean, the only person I'm protecting at this point is Rook.

Defending the devil.

Even after all the shit he's said, I'm still protecting him, keeping our secret so that his friends don't feel betrayed that he withheld the truth from them. He's given me so much fucking shit about lying, and now, there's only one of us that's lying.

And it's not me. Not anymore.

"Last year, before Rosie died, Rook and I, we—" We what? Fucked? Fell in some type of weed-infused toxic love? "We messed around for a few months. It was just supposed to be a little secret fling. It wasn't even supposed to be that. He was only going to be a one night of freedom that no one knew about. I didn't expect it to turn into what it was. I didn't expect to —"

"Fall in love?" Lyra interjects, her pupils dark and wide.

Was it love?

I think it was the closest I'd ever gotten to it. I know when things get dark inside my head, I relive the time we spent together. I think of all the things we never got to do and what my life would be like had I stayed with him.

I shrug. "I'm not even sure that's what it was. I just knew by the end of it, I wanted to be with him. I wanted more, and I wasn't allowed to have it. I was dating Easton at the time or, I should say, engaged to Easton."

"I'm sorry. You said yes to a life with Easton Sinclair?" Briar looks at me, visibly cringing, making me laugh a little.

"Not willingly. His father set it up, and my family agreed so that Stephen Sinclair would keep paying our bills and funding my dad. I was going to leave after graduation. I wasn't going to go through with it. I'd planned on telling Rook everything and leaving with him. But..."

His face flashes in my head, his voice, the way she smelled.

It was all so real.

"But Easton found out, and he threatened to take Rose instead. He told me I had to end it with Rook, or he'd ruin Rosie. I had a choice to make, and I couldn't let anything happen to my sister. Not when her future was so much brighter than mine. She wouldn't have made it out alive if she had to live a life like that. I forced Rook away to save Rose, and in the end, I lost them both."

They both sit there with different versions of shock.

This weight lifted off my chest with the words, with saying them out loud.

Briar is the first to say something. “And he still doesn’t know the truth?”

I shake my head.

“You have to say something, Sage. You’re just letting him go around hating you!”

Is it worth it at this point? After everything I’d said, everything that happened, would it be worth it?

I doubt he would even believe me. I could tell him the sky is blue, and he’d still think I was lying to him. A relationship without trust is a disaster waiting to happen. All we had built in those months was destroyed, and I don’t think we can get that back.

We’re two people who never should’ve touched one another. We’re both too hardheaded, too stubborn, two flames constantly trying to burn higher than the other. We weren’t made for longevity.

I’d wanted him too quick. Too much. It wouldn’t have been healthy; it never would have worked. No matter how many times my heart tries to tell me differently.

Maybe all we were meant to be was that.

Two star-crossed lovers that made it out before Shakespeare had enough time to kill us.

I touch the scar on my collarbone, a reminder, a gift.

“I think it’s for the best that he doesn’t know. There’s too much damage done to rebuild anything. It would be a waste.”

“I just find it hard to believe he only feels hostility towards you. Rook is...” Lyra swings her arms in the air, trying to find the words. “He doesn’t pay attention to things he doesn’t care about. Yet, every time you’re around each other, the only thing he can focus on is you.”

I suck in a breath, pulling my knees up towards my chest and recalling the conversation I had with Rose just before I fell into Rook’s fire.

Rook Van Doren does not give attention to things he deems boring. If he notices you, if you interest him, you’ll know it.” Her eyes glanced over at me. “And I’d say he noticed you.”

I wondered if she’d always had an inclination about the two of us but didn’t say anything in fear I would deny it or get angry for her assuming

something like that.

“He’s only watching me because he doesn’t trust me. He thinks at any moment I’m going to do something that will put you guys in danger. I’m a liability to him, that’s all.”

I feel my phone vibrate next to me, the screen lighting up showing me that I have a new message.

Picking it up, I open it to find the last thing I want to see.

Pip, meet me at St. Gabriel’s, tomorrow at noon. And this time, you better have information.

“So that’s it, then? You won’t even consider talking to him?”

I shut my phone off, chewing the inside of my cheek, my stomach swimming with anxiety. A cold breeze nips at me from the open window, crawling down my skin and chilling my bones.

“No. We died that day, and he intends to keep it that way.” I push myself off the side of the bed. “Can I borrow a sweatshirt from one of you?”

I hope that would be enough to pull away from this topic. Today has taken enough emotional energy from me, and continuing to talk about Rook is only a bitter reminder of everything I’ve lost and will never get back.

“Yeah, grab one of mine. Briar’s consist of Alistair’s clothing, and no one wants to smell like his musky cologne,” Lyra says. “Well, I mean, besides you,” she offers towards Briar with a grin.

I laugh, opening the small door to Lyra’s very disorganized closet. It’s already being held ajar by the number of clothes that are piled at the bottom, and I realize that I think I’d rather wear Alistair’s hoodie than go exploring through Lyra’s closet.

Whether it’s because I’m stoned or I just find it funny, I keep imagining this is where she keeps her live specimen she doesn’t want us to find out about. I start giggling a bit, thinking about it.

Reaching up on my tippy-toes to grab the dark purple sweatshirt at the top of the shelf, I yank at the sleeve, and it comes falling down along with a few other heavy items that crash onto the floor.

“Shit, Lyra, I’m sorry,” I apologize as I bend down, trying to make sure I didn’t break anything. I quickly attempt to rearrange the clothes and box that had tumbled down so I can put it back where I found it.

The medium-sized shoebox sits sideways in front of me. At first I think they’re keepsakes of her mother or even her positive experiences thus

far at college. But then I see the expensive, knitted, off-white pullover that looks way too big for Lyra.

There's also a bottle of men's Armani bodywash that is half-empty, several handwritten notes that don't match my friend's chicken scratch penmanship, candid photographs, and the most damning piece of the puzzle is a cufflink—a lapel pin tie bar that's designed to keep the edges of a suit together at the wrist, and it had been designed into the shape of the letters *T. P.*

"It's not—" She stands up, her face turning ghostly. "It's not what it looks like."

I scoop up a stark white handkerchief with a blotchy red stain in the middle.

"This isn't Thatcher's belongings in a box inside of your closet?"

Lyra had always depicted herself as the shy, bug geek who enjoyed her life of invisibility. But I was starting to gather that was only what she wanted people to think.

"Just," she breathes, "let me explain."



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

forgive me father

rook

It is said in Western folklore, you can use a crossroads to summon the devil or a demon. Depends on what deal you're trying to make.

They are hailed by ritual items said to be buried in the center of where the roads intersect. It is there that you can bargain a wish for the cost of your soul. You can be granted anything your heart desires, but on a fixed date of the demon's choice, hellhounds will unearth from the underworld, ready to claim that soul.

I'd been summoned for vengeance, to deal karma to someone with whom I'd been biding my time. Someone that I had once made an agreement with, and I had let them go untouched, scot-free.

But now, it's time to collect.

I lean against a tall pine tree, the sound of my cigarette burning disturbed the silence.

For an entire year, I'd been trying to get her out of my bloodstream. Trying to cut her out like some flesh-eating disease, trying to penalize myself for having faith in someone like her. I realize now, I can't cut her out.

I'm going to have to cure the root of the infection.

Eliminate the virus at its source.

And that's just what I planned to do as I find myself standing here on the crossroad in front of St. Gabriel's church, staring at the back glass of Sage's car that sits adjacent to a black sedan.

I'm not sure what she had invited into the world when she decided to negotiate with the feds. When she decided to make herself one of the enemies.

My greatest enemy.

But it had unleashed an entirely new degree of wicked inside of me.

I tried to rationalize after leaving Silas at the graveyard. I tried to calm down and give her some leeway. Maybe they really were friends of her father and she didn't know what they were up to.

Once again, I had given her the benefit of the doubt. My heart went against my gut and tried to convince me once again it was all a misunderstanding. Something about her keeps wriggling beneath my skin, turning all my screws backwards and making me place confidence in her that she doesn't deserve.

When someone shows you their true colors, you have to believe them. And Sage is flying her colors high today.

I hadn't been stalking her; I'd actually planned on confronting her about it, but when I saw her leaving the dorms alone, I decided to follow. I drove behind her a good distance, at a slow pace, but fast enough that I kept her taillights in view.

When she pulled into what was left of the church where a car was already waiting on her, it was then I knew what she had really been up to this entire time.

Why she had decided to come back, her plan all along.

I've been standing out here for about thirty minutes, starting to grow impatient, when I see Detective McKay exit the burnt church doors where they had been chatting. Where she was running her pink mouth about everything we had been up to, reporting back, being the good little rat she is.

My mouth waters with venom, my hands itching for retaliation. I step into the trees farther as he gets into his vehicle, turning the key and slowly backs out of the space.

I wait until I'm sure he won't be returning, pleased to see that Sage is still inside the building I had once set fire to. I toss my cigarette out onto the ground, stepping on it as I walk towards the entrance.

An odd feeling comes over me. I'm not twitching or enraged. I'm calm; I'm not overcome with impulse. It's as if my body knows exactly what we're coming here to do. What we're here to take care of.

The door whines as it opens, casting a beam of sunshine into what remains of the inside of the cathedral. Ashes and soot are stuck to the

ground, burned benches, and broken decorations. It looks exactly like I had always wanted it to.

Like hell.

This place of holy ground burns my feet. I feel it sizzle through my shoes, searing my soles.

I like that feeling, stepping into a place I know I don't belong just because I fucking feel like it.

Maybe that's because I'd always felt more comfortable in chaos.

Sage is stationed in the front, her hands resting on one of the only pews left, her head tucked between her shoulders. From this distance, it almost looks like she's praying.

"God doesn't talk to people who make deals with the devil," I call out. "Don't you know that?"

She flinches like my words wound her and shifts her body so she is facing me. All the pigment in her face drains when her worst nightmare comes to life. I've caught her in the act. There is no lying; there is nothing to help her out of this situation.

"What are you doing here?" she asks, eyebrows furrowed together.

I walk forward slowly, looking around at the damage my flames had done to this holy place. The place that had started the rumor of my demonic lineage. The first place to turn me into a monster.

"I told you, Sage, I would be watching you, didn't I? And it's a good thing I did," I laugh cruelly, "or I would have missed you meeting with Detective McKay. Since when did your daddy start making friends with the FBI?"

Panic washes over her. The web that she had spun is crumbling down around her, and she's grasping for something to say, a lie to conjure up.

"Rook, let me explain. I'm not—"

"You're not what?" I spit out, my upper lip curling, filled to the brim with anger that she would have the fucking guts to lie straight to my face after I'd caught her red-handed.

"You're not snitching to the feds about our plans?" My footsteps are heavy thuds. Each weighted movement forward just builds my fury.

"No, that's not what is happening. I know that's how it looks, but it's not. My father came to the facility with Cain—Detective McKay—and they tried to give me a deal."

“That’s how you got out, isn’t it? You cut a fucking deal? To do what? Snoop around, get close to us, just so you could stab us in the back? Have us all sent to prison before we got to put your father’s head on a stake?”

I’m closing in on her while she shakes her head back and forth quickly, stepping away from me with every single step in her direction. Fear bubbles up in her eyes, making my mouth water.

It doesn’t matter. She can back away as much as she’d like. She can run if she wants. It won’t fucking matter, because she’s in my clutches now.

And there is no way in hell I’m letting her get away.

“No!” she shouts. “I mean yes, but I wasn’t going to do it. I just needed them to let me out so that I could help you guys get to my father. I was going to double-cross them, not you. I just needed them to believe me enough to let me out. That’s it.”

I bite my bottom lip, smirking. “And you’re good at that, aren’t you? Getting people to believe you.”

Her back hits the front of the confessional. The sturdy wood that it’s composed of had fought against the heat of the fire, leaving most of it intact. I can practically feel her heartbeat running rapid in her chest.

“I’m not lying, not to you. I swear that’s the truth. Cain is working with this group called the Halo. All of them are—they’re the people my father owed money to. They’re taking girls around Ponderosa Springs and selling them.” She reaches her hands forward, palms out as if that will stop me, prevent me from doing what I want to do.

“I only want to stop my father, and then I’m gone. I swear to you. Just like that first night at the lake house, I’m telling the truth. You have always had all of my truths, all of them.”

So many questions run through my brain, overwhelmed with the information she just spewed. What the fuck is the Halo? Are both of the feds dirty? Is she even telling me the truth?

I try to take in the information. I try to process, to take what she says and hear her words, but I physically can’t.

My body temperature is so hot it’s about to melt my clothes. It’s boiling my brain, and the color crimson starts to leak into the corners of my vision. I’ve waited a year to make her feel this pain that she’d left me with. This betrayal. I want to hurt her. To make her pay.

But flashes of the girl on that dock, broken and ripped apart by her past, hit me. They swipe across my memory at high speed, the organ inside my chest tried tethering to it. I'm right back there, being the fool all over again.

But I refuse to do that.

I close in on her, slamming my palm so hard into the front of the confessional that it stings my hand.

"All. You. Fucking. Do. Is. Lie," I grind out, my teeth bared like a rabid wolf starved for food.

Her hands press into my chest while she shakes her head aggressively. "This is why I didn't tell you to begin with, you fucking prick! No matter what I say, you won't believe me! There is nothing I can say to make you trust me!"

I'm at my end. I'm starting to malfunction.

Because of her eyes.

They are fucking glowing. Bright blue like scalding flames, shining the way they did when we were together. When I thought she was something more. When the words that came from her mouth were ones coated in holy water.

They are so goddamn beautiful, and it hurts.

It hurts more than Thatcher's cuts, more than Alistair's hits, my father's words. I hurt so fucking much that it prevents me from breathing. Every single inhale feels like needles in my throat.

And for the first time in my life, I want the pain to stop. I need it to fucking stop.

No, no, no, I repeat to myself.

"Because all you are is a treacherous fucking poison. I trusted you, and look what that fucking did."

Do not let her do this to you again, Rook. Don't fall for this. It's a fucking trick. Pretty poison—it's the venom that's still pumping in your veins.

I take her fragile neck in my grasp, using the leverage to forcefully jerk her closer to me. Her scent gets all up close and personal with my nose, making it tingle. I press my waist into hers, feeling just how soft she is against me. Feeling just how easy she would be to break.

My cock stiffens, straining against my jeans.

I'd once thought she felt angelic in my arms. An angel that had wandered too far from home and found herself in the clutches of something sinister.

Now, she just feels like a sin.

The sin.

Primal, hot, and immoral.

This is the one thing I've been depriving my body of for a year now. Refusing the temptation, punishing myself for what's directly in front of me now. And I don't know how I'm going to stay in control.

"I never lied to you, Rook. Not in the way you think." She gasps for air against my grip. "I wanted you to keep—"

"The lowest, blackest, and farthest from Heaven," I interrupt her, tightening my fingers so she'll shut up. "That's where traitors go. Did you know that? That's where I'm going to fucking send you."

I don't want to hear her excuses. I don't want to hear any more lies.

It's my turn to make her hurt. It's her turn to be punished.

"Traitorous sluts like you deserve to be punished," I snarl, my hand moving up to her face, forcing her lips to pucker as my fingers dig into her cheeks.

"You sound awfully fucking sanctimonious for a man they call Lucifer. Aren't you supposed to reward sin?" she quips, her voice thick and sticky like cough syrup, leaving me bitter.

Fighting me just like I want her to.

I don't want her to already be broken. I want her to be a fucking fighter so that it feels even better when I make a mess of her.

My belt digs into the soft flesh of her stomach as I take my free hand, palming her ass, causing that short, short denim skirt to rise up. My fingers inch in between her legs, hovering over her pussy just above her panties.

The heat that radiates between her legs makes my knees fucking weak.

"No, Sage, this is my hell. My kingdom. My fucking rules. I reward good little whores only."

Just like I knew she would, she pants, opening her mouth. I spit directly on her pink tongue, using my hand on her face to close her jaw shut so she is forced to swallow it.

My lips crash with hers, desire pooling in my gut. It's all teeth and tongue. Her venom tastes sweet, too fucking sweet. She pushes against me, moving her mouth against my own, meeting my feral hunger.

I pour all my loathing into it, curing her with my tongue, damning her with my mouth. I bite down hard on her bottom lip, pulling it out barely as I bring my hand up from between her thighs, showering her with the juices that stick to my skin.

"Fucking pathetic. Look how wet you are. How long have you been thinking about this? About me?"

Her face heats up, cheeks bright with a mixture of pleasure and embarrassment.

I drop my hand from her face to the front of her low-cut shirt, grabbing a hold of the material and yanking it down. The tearing of fabric echoes in the air, and I'm left staring at her milky tits that are spilling over her black bra.

My head falls, and I inhale deeply, filling my lungs with her smell. I trail one long, slow lick from the valley of her breasts to the scar that runs along her collarbone. The matching one on my body starts to throb.

One year of depriving myself of this, and now the forbidden fruit is melting in my hands. All I can think about is feasting. My self-control is nonexistent at this point.

I rotate her body, spinning her around and pinning her front against the confessional. She reaches up and grabs the wooden bars that separate the two booths. I use both of my hands to lift her skirt, shoving it up her waist until her entire backside is visible.

"Rook..." she breathes.

"This is confessional, Sage. That's not how this starts," I hiss, running one hand up her spine and gathering a handful of her short hair in my hand. jerking it back so she arches her ass into my cock. "Or have you fallen so far from grace you don't remember?"

I knead my palm into her ass, giving her only a few moments to reply before I pull my hand back, slapping her flesh. My hand stings from the impact, and I look down to see the blood already rushing to the surface of her pale skin.

She squeals in surprise, the little noise shooting straight to my groin, making me grind into her harder.

“Answer me.”

“Go to hell. It doesn’t matter what I say, you wanna fuck me so bad it makes you look stupid,” she grits out, even though I know what she wants.

I grin, even though she can’t see it.

She wants me so badly she can’t even see straight, but she never gives in that easy. Which is why it’s more fun.

I know her body, what makes it tick, what makes it explode. The ins and outs of her pussy. She can front all she wants, that’s fine with me. It’ll only make the end result that much better.

“I live in hell, TG. Remember?” I hum. “You helped send me there.”

I pull my hand back again, sending another harsh smack across her skin, making her jump. I feel her try to pull away from the pain, but I root her in place by her hair, not letting her move.

She will feel this ache. She will feel it for as long as I tell her to.

I’ve spent a year punishing myself for her, and now it’s her turn.

“Don’t fucking move unless I say.”

Smack.

Smack.

Smack.

Three more blunt strikes to her sensitive skin, leave her quivering in my hold. My mouth waters at the sight of her plump ass all swollen and throbbing. I raise my hand back to deliver another blow, but I hear her sweet voice, sugary and erratic.

“I—” she stutters. “Forgive me, for I have sinned.”

I roll my hand over the sore skin, rubbing gently in slow circles. “Mmmm, that’s a good little whore.”

Snaking my fingers to her center, I find that she’s soaked through her underwear completely. Dripping for release, dripping for me. I shove the material to the side, using the pads of my fingers to massage her clit.

She moans loudly, grinding her hips against my hand. I move them back, slipping two fingers inside of her tight channel smoothly. My fingers pump in and out of her, curling as they disappear inside of her pussy, brushing that spot so deep inside of her no one else will ever be able to touch it like I do.

It’s here, while she’s bent over a confessional inside the remnants of a singed church, that I realize she had never been Eve.

I hadn't slithered into the Garden of Eden and stolen her, coerced her with the fruit. No, that would have been too easy.

She had always been my Lilith.

The reason I fell from grace, tumbling through the clouds and thrown into the pits of hell. Damned to live an eternity in the flames because of her.

"Confess," I grunt, my hand working to undo my belt and zipper. "Tell me what I already know. That you love being my dirty, fucking slut."

"Rook, please. I need—"

"I know. I know what you need. But you're going to give me what I need first."

I slow the pace of my fingers, teasing her, giving her just enough to feel pleasure but not nearly enough to really enjoy the sensation.

Pulling my cock from my jeans, I use my free hand to stroke myself as I put her through deliberate torture. Pre-come drips from my throbbing tip, falling onto her ass.

"I love being your dirty slut," she whimpers. "I want you to fuck me, break me, use me."

There's no more holding back for me.

I replace my fingers with my shaft, drilling into her with no warning. We both groan when I enter her, sliding all the way inside her silky walls until I can't go any farther. She pulses around me, sucking me in like a vise.

"Your cunt takes me so fucking good."

Her back bows, spine stretching as she pushes into me farther.

So tight and so warm.

I start to hasten the tempo, grunting as I do. Violent smacks fill the stuffy air inside as my cock glides so easily in and out. My rough hands reach around to clutch onto both of her arms, holding my own out straight, using this new grip to drill into her with more force.

Her mewls and whimpers are fuel to the fire. I watch as her ass jiggles with the power of my thrusts. Every single time I slip inside of her feels like another injection of her into my veins. Straight shots of adrenaline into my system.

She is so fucking intoxicating.

"Rook, I—" she moans, trying to form words, but I already know what she wants to say.

This angle has my cold jewelry tickling her G-spot over and over again.

“I know. Come all over my cock. Be a good whore for me and come.”

She snaps, falling apart on me. Her cunt is snug around me, clamping down and refusing to let me go. Sage drenches my dick, soaking my length in her juices.

I keep forcing my way into her body, even though she’s shaking in my arms, whimpering from the overload of pleasure. Sweat falls from my forehead, my body chasing that high.

My own release tears through my body, hitting me like a wave.

I groan loudly as static zips through me, racking my bones while I pour myself into her heat, filling her to the brim with me, so much that I’m leaking out of her body.

Sage’s body falls slack in my arms, twitching from the surge of her climax. I breathe heavily, catching my breath for a moment before stepping back from her body. I slip out of her, sliding her panties back into place to catch my come that’s started to drip from her tender hole.

I feel my cock start to stiffen again just thinking of her walking around with my come staining her underwear.

I’m buckling my belt before I notice she’s turned around to face me, her body relaxing against the confessional, blistering blue eyes seared towards me.

She waits for me to say something, waits for me to explain what just happened between the two of us.

“What?” I snap.

There is a snap of pain that flicks across her face, but she hides it quickly. Nodding her head, she takes her bottom lip between her teeth. She fixes her shirt the best she can, pulling her skirt down back where it belongs.

“So you can fuck me, but you won’t trust me?”

“Well, your cunt doesn’t lie to me. Your mouth does.”

Silence falls within the space. Our adrenaline is falling, our tension leaving.

I reach into my pocket, grabbing my cigarettes, then place one on my lips and light it.

“You’re right. I did lie to you,” she says, tucking her hair behind her ears, exposing her flushed cheeks.

“Save it—”

“No, it’s my turn to talk,” she interrupts me. “I did lie. The day in the theatre when I told you Easton and I were perfect for each other. When I told you that I was only using you. All of that was a lie.”

This had been what I wanted when it happened. These words had been what I hoped for when I first heard about their engagement.

Now, I couldn’t give a fuck less. It wouldn’t change anything now. All that damage had been dealt.

Sage steps closer to me, “The engagement was for my father’s benefit. Stephen Sinclair was giving him money, and in order to continue getting it, Stephen wanted a marriage between me and Easton. I assume because he wanted to be in control of everything. When I started to fall for you, I swear on my sister that I was going to leave all of this shit behind after graduation and be with you.”

A thin stream of water lines the bottom of her eyes as she holds on to the last pieces of her pride.

“I wanted to be with you so bad, Rook.” The first few tears fall, her voice cracking. “But Easton found out about us. He found out and made it very clear that if I didn’t follow through with the marriage, they would force it on Rosie, and I couldn’t do that to her.”

She tries to wipe her cheeks, but they’re falling too fast, there really is no point.

“I had already been ruined. Cain had already broken me in. Made me accustomed to what happens in that kind of life. Rosemary wasn’t—she was free and happy. There was no reason for me to ruin that because I wanted to be selfish. I’d done that enough. I was just trying to protect her. Trying to protect you.”

I’m doubting everything. My gut, my heart, my brain.

The lines of honesty and deception are blurry, evil and righteousness muddled once again by the grime that leaks from the grounds of Ponderosa Springs. It makes me question if she’d ever really lied to me, if I spent a year of my life hating the only woman who’d sparked my interest and kept it.

I don’t care.

I don’t care.

I—

“Cain did what?” I snap, furrowing my eyebrows, stepping the rest of the way there. I let my anger take the forefront, shadowing the ache in my chest for now. Not wanting to face what could be the truth. Not right now.

It’s too much to take in at one time, and I’m not even sure I believe her. I never know what to believe from her.

“That’s what you—”

“Sage,” I grunt. “If you ever gave a shit about me, answer the fucking question. What did Cain do to you?”

There is a numbness that settles on her face. Like she is separating her emotions from her mind in order to say it.

“The man I told you about at the lake house, the one who touched me as a kid.” She nods her head. “It was Cain.”

I feel as if hot oil is being poured directly onto my skin, making it sizzle and hiss. My bloodstream runs so fast that I’m starting to get light-headed. The higher my anger climbs, the lower my pain gets, and I need it to go away.

Because this pain, the one I feel for her, I want it to go away.

I need it to stop.

This whole time, I was trying to cut her out of me when in reality, I was just trying to sever the connection I’d created with her. Every single time Thatcher dug that blade into my skin was just me trying not to feel the ache of her.

Her pain. Her sorrow. Her anger.

I felt all of it as if it were my own, and to some degree, it was.

And I hated her for ruining something that powerful. A bond that my heart desperately tried to argue could not be faked. That what we had was real

And although Sage stands impassive to her trauma, I’m not.

“Every night from the age of ten to thirteen, when he left for the academy.” She pauses. “But he isn’t what matters. I don’t care anymore.”

She’s become so jaded to her own trauma that she doesn’t care about what happens to the one who hurt her, only the man who took her sister. She’s succumbed to acceptance, forced to work with a man who took her innocence before she even knew what it was.

The man who stole her wings.

I'm unsure of almost everything now, except that I want to wear Cain's bowels as a necklace.

"You're coming with me."

"Why? Where are we going?" she asks.

I find her eyes, seeing a woman who built herself from the last spark of her dying embers.

A phoenix.

One that makes no excuses for who she made herself into, no apologies if you get too close to her and find yourself scorched.

They'd ripped her wings from her back, but she replaced them with ashes and eternal wings made of the hottest blue flame.

And in order for her to fly, I'm going to cut the chains keeping her rooted to the ground.

But first...

"There is a theory I need to test."



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

all our secrets

rook

“We need to talk.”

The door that I shoved open bounces off the wall.

I look at Thatcher, who is perched on top of his bed, legs crossed and quiet as he lifts an eyebrow over the top of his book.

“No need to slam doors,” Alistair says as he leans back in his chair, turning from the desk he’d been hunched over before we made our loud entrance. “Why is she here?”

I look to my side, seeing Sage standing with her arms crossed, a look of frustration and confusion on her face.

“I’d like to know myself,” she mutters.

After I’d threatened to slash all four of her tires and drag her here against her will, she agreed to come with me.

She knows I don’t bluff, and I wasn’t taking no for an answer.

I need this.

I need to see if I’m just immune to her dishonesty or if she was actually telling the truth. I can’t take another risk with her. I wouldn’t survive another betrayal at her hands, not again, and neither would she.

“Are you alright?” Silas mutters, scanning her face before looking up and down her body. It’s not sexual; he’s just checking to see if she has any injuries, but it irritates me. He takes deliberate steps in her direction, and as if on instinct, I step in front of his path.

He stops, his shoes touching the tips of my own. Our eyes connect, and there is an unspoken challenge that occurs between the two of us. I wouldn’t fight him, not over something like this, because I know it didn’t come from a place of desire but from longing.

However, I'm still not going to let him cradle Sage because she reminds him of Rose.

"She is fine," I grunt. "Are you taking your meds?" I'm not able to stop myself. I couldn't ask him at the graveyard—the emotions were too raw, too fresh.

But this isn't him.

He holds my stare, unmoving. "I don't need a babysitter, Rook."

"I'm not going to ask again. Are you taking—"

"Yes."

This is not over. I know it isn't, and I plan on resisting this as soon as what I came here for is done.

I look over my shoulder at Sage. "I want you to tell them exactly what you told me about Cain. All of it."

"Why should—"

"Sage," I whisper her name like some deadly, beautiful hex. A dark and lonely curse. "For once, just do what I say."

I know she wants to fight me; it's what she does best. But she always wants to prove herself, prove to me she's finally telling the truth. It takes a moment, but she does as I ask.

I step to the side, and I watch the way her mouth moves. How her tongue flicks when she says words with the letter *L* in them. Trying to catch a change in her eye color—anything that will show me what I may have missed the first time around.

I've never felt so calm. So calculated. This is not a decision I could act explosively towards. Even though I want to. Even though all I want to do is believe her so I can rip Cain McKay's heart right from the inside of his chest and eat it raw.

This is the theory I wanted to test.

I wanted to see if Alistair would be able to detect treachery in her tone or if Thatcher could see right through the walls she'd built around herself to see her true motive. Even Silas—maybe he would notice a genetic habit in Sage that Rose also did when she told a little white lie.

I need to see if it's only me that had missed the signs. If I'd been so fucking blinded by the cinnamon-dusted freckles on her cheeks or her curved cupid's bow, so distracted by our connection that I never even had a chance to sense her lies.

They have an unbiased vision of her.

They don't share the bond I did with her, and maybe that will be enough for them to tell if she is really telling the truth or if she's playing us. Playing me.

She tells them everything about Cain. About her father. And when she gets to the part of her childhood, that pain comes back.

"Sad story, truly." Thatcher is the first to speak, readjusting his glasses as he sits up on the edge of the white bed. "But sad doesn't mean I have to believe you. This could be one big web you're spinning so we trust you, and while my friends, much to their disagreement, have hearts..." He pauses. "I don't."

Sage stands tall. Strong. Unwavering even as Thatcher tries to question her.

"I'm not telling you for pity or because it's sad. I don't need that from any of you." She makes sure to look at me last after she says that. "I'm telling you so I can help. So we all can get what we want at the end of this. Justice for my sister."

"Why would you help us? Why wouldn't you have just taken the deal, turned us in, and tucked tail?"

It's the question on all of our minds. What I've been thinking about since she told me. We weren't exactly friends in high school, and she had always expressed her distaste for us and our anarchy.

"Because of Rosie." She sighs. "She saw something in each of you, even if you tried to bury it deep. Even if I can't see it myself. She was good at that, seeing things beneath the rubble. She did it with me, and it was no surprise that she did it with you. On multiple occasions, she asked for me to see those things for myself, and I ignored her. I listened to what the town and its shitty people said, instead of seeing things for myself. I am not here to be your friend or make bonds. I'm here because it's what she would have wanted, and I'm obligated to do this. I owe her the amends she deserves, and I owe it to her to protect the ones she cared about, and that is you. All of you."

The sting of remembrance is sharp.

It vibrates in the air, slicing each of us differently. Rosemary's memory is alive and breathing in the room. Her energy, her presence, it's the

reason we are doing all of this. Because it's a fucking crime for that energy to have been taken from this planet.

One of the last good things in this sick, twisted world, gone in the blink of an eye.

I look at her sister, her glassy eyes and straight spine, standing so strong even though I can see just how badly she wants to fall apart. And my hands shake because they want to catch her. I want to deny it, but I can't.

I'm desperate to see the girl behind the mask again. To peel back those hardened layers and soak myself in her.

But I can't.

Not right now.

"Cain has to go," I say. "I want him dead."

"And you need to stay protected until then," Silas adds, staring a hole into Sage's face.

My jaw tightens. Silas doesn't need to protect her. She is not his to protect.

"I don't need anyone to protect me. I can handle Cain. Involving him will only put more heat on you than necessary."

Thatcher stands up. "If there is blood, count me in."

My blood starts to pump hot. The calm that had once embraced me is diluting. My rage is starting to surface, my need to punish. All the ways I could break him start to filter through my mind.

"We are not doing anything irrational right now." Alistair steps in, doing what he does—controlling. "I'm not saying it doesn't need to happen. We just need to make sure we're going at it with a clear head and not fueled by our emotions."

His dark eyes flicker towards me.

It's in that moment that I realize how deep in my own shit I am. Because even though Alistair is making sense, I don't want to listen. Even if I have to go after that scum on my own, I'll do it. Even if I don't want to, even if I need them.

I will torture that sorry excuse of man until he's crying for his mother and begging me to give him the mercy of death.

Even if it means taking the fall on my own. I would do it.

Because no one, not even me, deserves the kind of pain Sage harbors on her soul from what he did to her.

“We are going to do it,” Silas persists, “and I want you to stay at my parents’ house until it’s done.”

The room goes still, and my blood pressure skyrockets.

“Not fucking happening,” I growl. “She is not staying with you.”

His head snaps towards me, so quick I can almost hear it crack.

“Don’t forget, Rook. It’s my girlfriend that died, my girlfriend we are avenging.”

I walk towards him, trying hard to remind myself that he is grieving. That he is going through something unbelievably unfortunate, but it’s not working.

“Don’t forget, Silas,” I hiss, “your girlfriend is not Sage, and she doesn’t need you to protect her.”

“Yeah? Are you going to do it?”

I draw back from him. What the fuck is he saying right now?

I know he lost Rose and he’s trying to grab at the pieces of her that are still left. But this, this is crossing a line I didn’t realize I had.

There is a fierceness sizzling in his gaze, one I can’t remember seeing before, and it’s making him feel like more of a threat than a brother.

Sage may not be a friend—we may hate one another—but it’s ours.

And she is mine.

“You fucking—”

“Stop,” Sage says loudly, looking at the both of us. “Let me make this clear for everyone. I am not a damsel in distress, and I won’t let you put yourself at risk for something that I can handle. I can slay my own demons, and I don’t need you or anyone else to hand me a knife to do it.”

The phoenix.

There she is, glowing, bright, destructive.

They tried to make her into dust, and look at her now.

A goddamn force.

“Everyone just fucking calm down. We can talk about this when everyone has a chance to process,” Alistair says, “I do think you staying with Silas is a good idea. It’s the best way to keep an eye on you.”

“I don’t need—”

“It’s not about protecting you,” he snaps, eyes dark. I know it’s because he isn’t over what happened to Briar. “That’s at the bottom of my fucking priorities. I don’t know if we should fully trust you yet. This is an

insurance policy. We can watch your every move, so if you even think about working with that fed, we will know about it.”



Rain trickled down from the sky hard, pouring from the pitch-black sky. I watched it fall from my place on Thatcher’s covered courtyard space. Lightning strikes illuminated the clouds for a singular second, broadcasting the immersive sculpture garden just beyond the in-ground pool before darkness took over once again.

I closed my eyes just as the thunder shook the earth, allowing myself to succumb to the soft pitter-patter.

“Come on, sweet boy. Let’s dance.”

I looked out at the heavy pour of rain, then up at my mother. Her eyes did that crinkling thing at the corners like it always does when she smiled. Dark waves of brown hair fell way past her shoulders, brushing her lower back.

I didn’t want to dance today.

I was sad, and all I wanted to do was stay inside, away from the rest of the world.

“But Momma, it’s raining,” I mutter.

She squatted down, lowering herself to my height. Tucking a piece of my growing hair behind my ear, she rubbed her palm against my cheek. It made me sleepy when she did that because that was what she did just before bedtime every night.

“You had a hard day today, yeah?”

I nodded.

Kids at church had been extra mean today. They’d all stood around me, shouting nasty things about my birthmark, picking on me because I was different than them. If I would have known they would have been so cruel, I wouldn’t have shared anything in Sunday school.

I would have just stayed quiet.

“The rain will wash all of that away. All the sadness and pain will slip right off your shoulders, cleaning you right up. The best time to dance is in

the rain.”

“Dad says I just need to toughen up.”

She laughed. “Your father must have forgotten what it was like to be picked on because I’ll tell you a secret, sweet boy. Your dad was not always so tough. He used to be a boy, just like you, and he wore these glasses that kids used to make fun of. Just because he was different. But that’s what I liked about him, what I love about you. Being different will mean you will feel alone at times. But when you find the people who accept those differences, they will be with you for a lifetime.”

And then we danced in the rain.

We let the rain pour down our skin, and I remember feeling like I was swimming rather than in a rain shower. I didn’t come inside until I was soaked to the bone.

I felt a lot of things when my mother died.

But alone wasn’t one of them.

Because I had them, and from the moment we all met, I felt like I was understood. I never had to explain myself to fit in; they just got me. They accepted me. Scars, trauma, and all. And just like my mother said, they would be with me for a lifetime.

“How long?” Alistair asks as he walks onto the patio, with Thatcher and Silas close behind.

“Nine inches.” I pull the cigarette from my lips. “That’s hard. Do you need to know soft measurements too or?”

He rolls his eyes, yanking the smoke from my hand and taking a long draw before talking again.

“How long have you been fucking with Sage.”

I drop my head against the wall, knowing this conversation needed to happen. Knowing it’s time to tell them, but I just don’t know where to start.

Keeping her from them was never with malicious intent or because I didn’t want them to know. I think it was because I was afraid to say it out loud. If I spoke on our history, on her, then it made it real.

And that makes the loss of her even more real.

“We wanted to wait for you to tell us on your own time, but we need to know what this is to you before we kill someone over her. I’m not adding another body to my list because of a quick fuck.”

I’m not surprised they already knew.

When you know each other on the level we do, you don't miss much.

We know each other's body language, the tells, our emotions. It's all connected—we feel each other. It's been that way for as long as I can remember.

"We aren't killing someone for her. As Silas said, this is for Rose too."

"But not for you it isn't," Thatcher says, "This is for Sage, and please, don't try to deny it. I'm tired of pretending I don't know."

I look over at Silas, his subdued demeanor settled into his shoulders. That unhinged look in his eyes from earlier is gone, but the feeling in my gut isn't.

I watched him take them on Rosie's anniversary and every morning before that in the dorms. He was on schedule with them, but something's still wrong, and convincing him to go to the doctor for a new medication is not going to be easy.

But nothing with him had even been.

"How long," Alistair says again, but this time it's not a question.

I take a breath, scratching the back of my head, knowing what I need to say but not knowing how to explain it.

"Start of senior year. It wasn't supposed to be anything serious, I just wanted to twist the princess into a little knot of chaos. Show her that she wasn't any better than me, than us. But then she started to change, it started to change. She was different than what I expected. Better."

Trying to consolidate what we were is hard. How do you explain that someone was everything and nothing at the same time?

That she had been the first person since the guys and Rose I'd wanted to see me. To see all of me, know everything. Because I'd thought she'd accept it.

I thought—

"Wasn't she engaged to Easton during senior year?"

I grind my teeth. "Yes, but I didn't know about that until the end. I knew she was still dating him, and I let it go because she needed to wait until graduation to break things off. Her parents would have lost their shit, I just didn't know why. I thought it was because of me. I don't exactly have Easton's reputation."

“So that’s why the stick up his ass has been extra annoying.” Alistair scoffs. “So what happened?”

Everything.

Nothing.

“I found out about the engagement, and she—” Fucking destroyed me. “She ended things with me. Spitting some shit about me just being a phase, that she never planned on leaving Easton.”

“That’s why you showed up at my door? I’ve been slicing you up over her?” Thatcher says, in a tone that’s close to anger, but with him, I never know.

“Yes.” I drag my hands down my face in frustration. “I tried to cut her out. I wanted to punish myself for being so fucking stupid, for trusting her. But she’s like venom, a goddamn tumor, man. She just keeps growing back.” I let out a heavy sigh. “Now I don’t know what to believe or think. She came clean about Cain and told me that she was forced into the engagement. Apparently, her father was getting money from Stephen, and in exchange for that, he wanted a wife for his son. Then Easton found out about us and threatened to take Rose instead. So she made a choice, and we’ve been hating each other since.”

And there it is.

My truth to burn going up in smoke.

My pretty poison all out in the open.

Saying it out loud does exactly what I thought it would.

Makes me feel like even more of an idiot.

The fool who’d fallen for a girl who didn’t give a shit about him, and the worst part is I knew. I knew Sage was a dangerous creature. That she was wrapped in caution tape.

Seamlessly made.

Designed for deception.

The exquisitely colored frog with neon patterns, stunning jellyfish with a bioluminescent glow, the exotic caterpillar. All designed to bring attention and ward off danger.

I know what she is, and yet I chase it anyway with no idea of how much damage it would wreak on me.

“What was the point of keeping it from us?” Alistair asks.

I take the cigarette back from Alistair, filling my lungs with the tar.

“What’s the point of you lying about Dorian?”

They aren’t the only ones who could see through lies.

“What are you going to do when he gets out of rehab for a drug problem he never had? Your parents can’t keep him locked away forever. What are you going to tell Briar when she finds out the truth? We all have our secrets, and they come out when they are ready to, but don’t stand there and act like you don’t have any either.”

“Don’t be an asshole,” he says. “I’m not pissed about you and Sage. I’m pissed that you felt you needed to hide it.”

“I just didn’t think you’d understand.”

“We don’t need to, Rook. We’ve never needed to.”

The rain falls faster, buckets of water pouring down from the sky. This storm had been brewing all day, and it’s finally here with cracks of lightning and thunder.

“If I say no, you’re still going to kill Cain, aren’t you?”

I look at them, all of them.

Each of them represents a part of my life that I wouldn’t know what to do without.

It is dysfunctional, and we don’t always see eye to eye. We fight probably more than we do anything else. But they are my home. A dark, bloody, haunted house, but still my home.

Stopping at Alistair, I stare at him hard. The older brother I never got.

“If it were Briar?”

“He’d already be dead.”

I nod, knowing that would be his reaction, knowing his response before he said it.

“This means it’ll be my problem. I would take the fall if shit went south. I’ll protect you all from the blowback if there is any.”

“You’re not killing anyone alone,” Thatcher says. “Sharing is caring, but just so we are clear, I’m not fond of Sage, and I don’t trust her.”

“Is there anyone you are fond of?” I raise an eyebrow, amused.

“No. The human species disgusts me.”

I laugh for a short moment before looking at Silas, who hasn’t stopped staring at me since he walked out.

“Si, I know—”

“Do you love her?” he asks bluntly.

I know what love is. I felt it for my mother and at one point for my father—sometimes I still do. I feel it towards the guys even though I've never spoken those words out loud to any of them. I'm aware of what it feels like.

But nothing feels like Sage does. I've never experienced anything like her in my life, and it makes this question difficult.

"I don't know what it is I feel towards Sage." Lightning strikes hard, shaking the ground. "But whatever it is, it's mine."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

accidents happen, right?

sage

“What are you doing in here?”

I spin from my open suitcase to see two shorter Silas look-alikes, with light brown skin and dark hair that is styled differently on each. One has a basketball shoved beneath his arm, while the other is gazing at me with his arms crossed.

“Well, it would appear I’m breaking into your spare bedroom,” I say humorously, hoping my joke will somehow break the ice between me and these teenagers who are watching me like a hawk.

When they don’t laugh or grin, I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear.

“I’m, uh,” I trip out, “Silas’s friend. I’m just staying here until my dorm room is fixed. Mold is a bitch.”

I decide that telling them the same white lie as we told Silas’s parents is the best route. I’m sure they wouldn’t understand if I told them I’m staying here so I can be monitored. That I had been deemed a liability and now they’re taking precautions when it comes to my motives.

“Silas doesn’t have friends,” the one with the basketball says. “Not friends like you, anyway.”

“Touché,” I admit. “We’ve recently become friends. It’s been a slow process.”

“You’re Rosie’s twin, aren’t you?” the other one asks. “You look like her.”

I think that’s the one named Caleb, and the other is Levi. But I’m not sure because they look very similar, only one is just a few inches taller than the other.

It had been a long time since someone asked me a question like that.
Are you a twin? Are you Rosemary’s twin?

I nod. "Yeah, I am."

Their shoulders seem to relax, leaving them less tense like they realized I'm not a threat all because of my sister.

"She used to take us to the junkyard with her when she was looking for materials she needed in her sculptures."

"And then we'd get frozen yogurt. Which is so much better than ice cream," Levi adds, cracking a stunning smile at the memory.

"Did she show you our super-top-secret froyo combination?"

Their eyes light up a little. "No!"

"Well, I guess that means we have to go sometime soon so I can pass on the tradition."

Our secret is a pretty common combination, I think, but to us as little girls, we thought we were just genius. It's cake-batter-flavored frozen yogurt with gummy bears. We used to be able to eat gallons of that stuff.

This home reminds me of simpler times between me and Rosemary. When we were little kids and the possibilities of the world were endless.

Everything about Silas's home is a surprise to me. He's this quiet, brooding, and angry man, while his home is quite the opposite. His mother had been in the kitchen making dinner when I came in, and his father was just coming down the steps from removing his suit. They were warm and welcoming.

Zoe and Scott had always been nice to me in passing. At events, at school when they were around, football games. I'd sadly thought they were just like everyone else, playing a part, pretending. But I can feel there's real love in this house.

And I'd felt bad that Silas had to lie to them about why I'm staying here. They'd been told my roommate had gotten sick and my dad was so busy at work that I didn't want to stay alone in the house. I think they thought it was because of Rose and my mother. That I was sad because it was lonely inside there, not because I'm plotting my own father's death.

"Do you miss her?" Levi asks me.

"I do." I nod gently, a smile on my face. "A lot."

Levi purses his lips. "Us too."

It seemed that all the boys in the Hawthorne family had two shared traits. They were men of very few words. And also like their older brother and everyone else, they were fond of Rosemary.

Which isn't unexpected. It never has been.

Rose had always been the kind of person that you can't help but fall in love with. Her empathic energy and calm soul seemed to call to people.

Anyone who knew her, really knew her, was aware of just how special she was.

"Caleb, Levi, leave her be."

Silas walks from up the stairs, coming up behind them and towering over their growing bodies, and the way they look up at him, it's more than just because of his height.

They really look up to him.

They admire him.

"See you around," they both say at the same time before disappearing down the hallway.

Silas follows their trail as they leave before turning his concentration on me. Walking only a few steps into the room, he leans against the doorframe, arms crossed in front of his chest. I never knew he had tattoos because most of the time he wears long sleeves. A lot like me as of recently.

Except I'm hiding scars, and he's just, well, hiding.

I'm uncomfortable with the awkward silence that settles between us, so I try to make simple conversation. I need this to be a painless process. A few weeks inside of his house to prove I'm not a snitch, a few weeks until my father is dead, and we can all go our separate ways.

It will be over.

"Are they twins?" I ask, referring to his brothers, grabbing some of my clothes out of my suitcase and walking them to the dresser against the wall.

"No, they are a year and some change apart. Caleb is the older one, he just never acts like it."

"Is Levi the one who is into basketball? Or is that just for show?" I slide the clothes inside the drawer, looking over my shoulder to find him already staring at me.

"Yes, and he's decent. He will get better once he learns to discipline himself and when he realizes that beating his uncoordinated brother does not make him great."

I laugh, not really thinking before I speak.

“Did you know Rosemary tried cheerleading when we were little? We stayed up all night going over routines, and she still forgot every single one of the moves the next day.”

I’m not sure why I expected him to laugh or even smile. It just feels nice to talk about her, in a positive light. To remember her for what she was and not what happened to her.

But she’s always a sore subject, a gaping wound, and talking about her probably makes things worse for him.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to bring her up.”

“It’s okay. I don’t mind. I like hearing other people’s memories of her.”

But it’s not that simple, is it? It’s never that simple.

“I know it’s probably hard for you,” I say. “Having me here. Seeing me. I’m not unaware of our similarities. I could have stayed in a hotel or stayed in the dorm. I don’t have to be here if it’s too much for you.”

He doesn’t say anything immediately, driving me crazy wondering what the hell is going through his mind right now.

I’m the living reminder of what he lost, and for a man in mourning, I’m not someone who he wants to see every day. I know that.

“Everything is hard. Waking up. Breathing.” He sighs. “Having you here isn’t hard. It’s the only easy thing in my life. Because I look at you and I know that a piece of her soul survived. That a part of her lives in you.”

My throat dries up like cotton is being stuffed into my mouth. I’m half-speechless and half-worried. I know that mindset can’t be healthy, not for him. But I don’t have it in me to say anything different.

“I—”

I stop abruptly as I turn around, finding Silas there. His stealth movements have me surprised, but his distance from me makes me uncomfortable. My back hits the handles of the dresser, feeling the wood dig into my skin as I try to put some space between us.

He’s close.

Too close.

“And I will do anything to protect that piece.” His voice tickles my face, and I’m trying to decide the best route in getting out of this situation that I have found myself in.

“Silas, what are you doing?” I ask softly, concerned for him, worried about him.

Those hardened eyes melt, the features in his face visibly softening, and for a moment I think it’s because he might cry for my sister.

I was wrong.

“Baby,” he says, and the word itself sounds like it was ripped from inside his chest. So guttural and painful, but I’m not his baby. “I missed you so much.”

He leans closer into my body, pulling himself further from reality and deeper into a fantasy that will never be real.

I panic as I place my hands firmly on his chest, shoving him back from me with all the force I can conjure up.

“Silas! I’m not Rose!” I shout.

It feels cruel to say out loud to him; I feel cruel just existing in the same space as him right now. I’m not going to pretend to understand what he’s battling inside, but I know this isn’t him. This is his mind playing tricks, his brain putting him through a slow form of torture.

He blinks a few times, grabbing for his head and squeezing too tightly to be comfortable.

“Stop, stop, stop,” he mutters. “No! That’s not right. It’s not right. You can’t do that—”

I know it’s not me that he’s talking to; it’s something much darker.

I never thought my stay at Monarch’s facility would be anything other than a nightmare. I want to forget I’d even stayed there, but right now, being there helps me in this situation.

Because I think of Eddison, the old man who sat by the window.

When he suffered from severe hallucinations, the nurses would do something called grounding. They would try to help him focus on the things that were real instead of the things that weren’t in order to prevent a psychotic episode.

I keep my distance so he doesn’t feel any more trapped than he already is.

“Silas, it’s me, Sage,” I say softly, “We are in your house, and you are safe. I know it feels real, but it’s not. They aren’t real.”

His breathing is erratic as he grits his teeth, starting to pace.

I know how damaging a full episode would be for him. He could be trapped inside of it for a few months, years even. I don't want it to get that far, but all I can do is try to bring him back. To remind him that this is his illness and not the real world.

"We are in your house, Silas. With your mom, your dad, Caleb, and Levi. We are real, and we are here for you, do you understand?"

Silas Hawthorne is the prime example of love not being enough.

If love was enough, he wouldn't seek out trouble and darkness. His parents' love should have been enough to keep him grounded. Keep him in line. But it isn't.

If love was enough, Rosie would still be alive. Because even if you took away all the love in my heart for her, all the love from Rook, Thatcher, and Alistair, Silas would have enough stored inside of him to last for an infinite amount of time.

It would have been enough to save her.

If only love were enough.

It physically hurts me watching him fight it. And I can do nothing but watch and hope he can pull himself away from it. That he can come around and not accept his delusion as reality.

The pacing slows, and he inhales through his nose, out through his mouth, over and over again until his breathing regulates. The mental exhaustion on his face is evident, and I can see just how tired he is.

"Silas," I say gently, eyebrows furrowed.

"I'm fine," he breathes. "I'm fine. I just, I need—" He stops rubbing his temples.

"Can I help? What do you need?"

"Sleep. I just need to get some sleep. What time is it?" He reaches deep into his front pocket, pulling out his phone and lighting the screen up. "I gotta take my meds."

I release the breath I was holding, relieved that he's still taking his medication. I knew that hallucinations were a part of his everyday life, and sometimes they were worse than others, but I'm still concerned.

"Maybe you should think about talking to your doctor about a new medication or a different schedule? Or even talk to your parents about it. Rook?"

He snaps his head up towards me, making eye contact. “It’s not the medication.”

“Then—”

“I’m just tired. I haven’t slept in a while. The hallucinations get worse when I haven’t rested. It’s not the medicine, Sage. It works fine. I’m fine,” he assures me. “I’m sorry for that. It wasn’t—” He pauses. “I know you’re not Rose. I know that.”

The heavy bags beneath his eyes partially back that story, and I have no clue the details of his diagnosis. I know that the overwhelming stress from all this can cause them to be worse, and I want to accept that he is okay.

But I’m afraid for him.

All it takes is one bad hallucination.

“It’s alright, I understand,” I say, feeling just how fast my heart is beating inside my chest. “Go get some sleep.”

He nods, shoving his hands inside of his pockets and walking towards the door. He pauses, grabbing the frame.

“Sage,” he mutters. “I’d like to keep this between us. Everyone has enough on their plate right now, and I don’t want them worrying about me because of one hallucination. Especially Rook. He freaks out enough.”

It doesn’t feel right keeping that from him. I’d kept enough secrets from Rook, and I don’t want to do that again.

He barely believes me as it stands now. I don’t need to give him another reason not to trust me. I wouldn’t forgive myself if something were to happen to Silas, knowing I did nothing to prevent it. Rosie would never forgive me for that.

“I won’t tell him,” I say. “You’re going to. I’ll give you a few days, Silas, but if you don’t tell him. I will.”



“Come on, Sage!”

Her voice tickles my ears, her laughter ringing through the trees. I spin around, looking at the heavy layer of snow coating the ground.

“Rosie?” I whisper, squinting my eyes trying to adjust to the brightness of the light reflecting from the snow. I wrap my arms around myself, a short-sleeve shirt and shorts the only things covering my body from the elements.

My breath comes out in visible puffs as I look just beyond the tree line to see Rosie standing in the middle of the Tambridge River. I’d only been here a handful of times, mostly during the summer at day parties when I was in high school.

I stumble to the river’s edge, seeing a thick sheet of ice over the typically rushing river. My brows furrow in confusion, and I look up. “Ro! Come back over here. It’s not safe out there!”

But she doesn’t say anything. She stands motionless, arms dangling by her side. Her dark hair stands out from the pale-colored dress she’s wearing. Soon, she begins to spin in a circle, slowly at first, but she picks up speed.

“Rosemary!” I call her again, but she still doesn’t hear me.

I inhale sharply when the ground gives beneath her spinning feet, and she drops into the water below. I can hear her body crash into the stream, and adrenaline zaps through my veins.

Uncaring about my own safety, I take off across the frozen river, only noticing now that my feet are bare. The cold air burns my lungs with each breath as I pump my arms faster to propel me forward.

I feel like I’m running in place. No matter how hard I push myself, I’m still so far away from her.

She’s gonna drown.

She’s gonna die.

“Rosie!” I scream, finally reaching the hole in the ice, finding nothing but pitch-black water. My heart thumps inside my ears, sweat pouring down my forehead. I drop to my knees, crawling frantically, looking for where the current might have dragged her.

Panic sets in, pricking my skin like needles.

My hands burn as I swipe them across the frost, searching for her beneath the surface.

Don’t let her drown.

Don’t let her die.

Hope flickers when I catch a glimpse of her hair. One of her hands reaches up and presses against the ice like she’s trapped on the other side of

a glass wall.

I start to compulsively slam my fists into the frozen water. Blood pours from my knuckles, the crimson red a bold contrast to the stark white, and it just continues to pour out.

“You can do it. You can save her.”

I lift both of my fists above my head, then heave them down. My arms begin to ache and spasm. My lungs aren’t able to inhale quick enough, and the blistering pain in my hands thrums through my entire body. But I keep going, slamming my hands over and over again, until it finally shatters.

Water bubbles up, and I immediately reach down into the frigid stream, slashing around to reach for her. I let her know that I’m here and I’m going to save her. That she’s going to be okay.

But I never feel her body.

Not until she shoots from the water, hair matted to her scalp with eyes that don’t look human. They are rotted and black, leaking dark sludge from the sockets, and all I can do is scream as her nails dig into my arms like daggers.

“It should have been you,” she hisses with a mouthful of black soot, oozing like tar.

“Rose!” I gasp, springing from the pillows, my hand clutching my t-shirt just above my heart.

My breathing is erratic, and I can feel sweat trickling down my lower back. I aggressively kick the blanket off my body, pressing my palms into my eyes and rubbing the sleep away. I haven’t had a nightmare since I was in the psych ward.

I glance over at the clock, seeing the green numbers flash, letting me know it’s three in the morning.

I’d thought my subconscious had finally given me a break. That my brain was done with the repetitive nightmares, that no matter how many times I had them, I still wasn’t prepared for.

Apparently, I was wrong.

Throwing my feet over the edge, I wiggle my toes on the chilly hardwood floors. My mouth feels like I’ve been gargling sand, and I’m in desperate need of water. I just hope I hadn’t woken any of the Hawthornes up.

I grab the cardigan I'd worn earlier today just in case anyone else is awake. I'm too exhausted to try and explain the scars on my wrists to Silas's father if he happens to be up for work.

My door whines as I pull it open, making me cringe. I pad down the hallway, to the stairs, and through the living room until I reach their open-design kitchen. As quietly as I can, I open nearly every single cabinet trying to find a glass, grabbing the door to the very last one before I locate one.

"Of course," I whisper. Why does everything in my life have to be so fucking hard? I can't even find drinkware without a challenge.

I turn on the faucet, making sure it's running cold before filling up the glass to the brim. Bringing the rim to my lips, I stare out the window in front of me as I gulp down half of the water. Rain is making soft pitter-patter noises against the glass, and I hope it continues because I always sleep best when it's raining.

I refill the cup and spin on the ball of my foot to take a step, but then I see him standing there. Rook is cloaked in darkness as he leans against the refrigerator door, staring at me. My grip on the glass loosens, the cup tumbling to the ground and crashing onto the tiled floor. Large and tiny pieces of glass scatter across the space, and the sound coupled with his presence in the shadows makes me jump.

A needlelike pinch makes me lift my foot from the ground, cursing in discomfort as I do. With what little light is inside the kitchen, I can see a piece of the glittering glass has sliced the bottom of my sole open.

I hear his footsteps approach me, knowing the sound of his walk. I look up to see the moonlight casting a dim glow on his face, and my entire being starts to ache.

His brown hair is tossed from sleep, eyes hooded and hazy, but somehow his gaze remains sharp and keen. The shadows of the night contrast his naked upper torso, highlighting every cut and grove. Those narrow lines of his body look like they'd been etched in stone. Everything from his shoulders to his lower abdomen that flexes every time he inhales is hard and defined.

My core throbs so badly, I could cry.

I run my tongue across my chapped lips as he starts to come closer, my hand reaching out to stop him before he steps on the sharp pieces that lie between us.

“Don’t,” I whisper, but he does what Rook does best.
Ignores me.

He takes another step, unbothered by the glass as he curls an arm around my waist, hauling me up and into his warm frame. My eyes follow the snake tattoo that adorns the side of his neck and disappears down his back.

I sink my teeth into my bottom lip, having to physically stop myself from pressing my nose into his skin and inhaling his scent. The leftover cologne from the day and the earthy smell of cannabis stick to him like a glove.

His hoodies used to be my favorite thing to sleep in because of the smell, because of the warmth, the comfort. With surprising gentleness, he places me onto the island, my feet dangling over the edge.

“Stay here,” he orders, his voice gravelly probably from just waking up or because he’d been smoking. Either way, I wanted to hear more of it.

When he turns away from me, the moonlight catches his back, and this time it’s not the toned muscles I’m caught off guard by.

It’s not even the tattoo that spans from shoulder blade to shoulder blade. The wings of the angel kissing each tip of his shoulder and the body of the tethered man they are attached to are inked down the center of his spine.

No, it’s not the way it fits his body beautifully.

It’s the scars.

Some are healed completely, sunken, and slightly discolored. Others are a dusty pink, indicating that they’ve just started the process of mending. But there are a few that are still scarlet red from irritation, barely scabbed over, and they look like they could bust open any second.

They run from just below the tattoo, all the way down to the dip in his spine. Multiple ones, some that look like they have been reopened too many times to be healthy.

When he returns, he is carrying a first aid kit that has already been opened, sliding it beside me as he takes some materials from inside.

“I’m fine. You don’t need to do that.”

“Shut up. It’s my fault you dropped the glass. Let me fix it.” He reaches down, curling his fingers around my ankle and lifting it upwards so he can examine the damage better.

Silence falls between us. It's not awkward or strained. It's a comfortable one.

Using his teeth, he rips open an alcohol swab, the pungent smell immediately making my nose burn. I hate that smell so much it makes me quiver.

“You alright?”

I nod. “Yeah. Just hate that smell. Reminds me of Monarch. I swear they soaked the halls with that shit every night.” He rubs the pads against my skin, causing a sting to buzz through my foot. I look down at him. “What are you doing here?”

“Making sure you’re safe.”

My heart thuds a little.

“Wasn’t aware you cared.”

“I wish I didn’t.”

Ouch. I suppose I deserve that.

“You seem to be pretty good at this. Used to cleaning up wounds?”

A smirk appears on his face. “Alistair has busted his knuckles open quite a few times in the years we’ve been friends. Had to learn at some point, or he’d probably bleed out.”

“And the scars on your back? You clean those up too?” I ask, knowing I have absolutely no right to know the truth behind them but wanting it anyway.

He presses a little harder into my fresh wound, making me jerk a little.

“Don’t ask questions you’re not ready to hear the answers to, Theatre Geek.”

My chest spasms hearing him call me that. At one point, I’d hated hearing it, but when I was inside those four walls, I would have given anything to hear him say it again.

“Who says I’m not ready for them? I begged you for them at one point and barely got anything from you. I have always been ready for your truths, Rook.”

The closer we’d gotten last year, the more I felt like he was hiding from me, only giving me the pieces that he wanted to while I had shown him all my skeletons in the closet. I don’t think he’d ever really trusted me to begin with.

But all I had wanted was to understand him better. To know him and not just his name, like everyone else. I wanted to know what made him tick. His dreams if he had any left at this point. His nightmares.

I just wanted to know him.

“What happened to you?” I ask, hoping he will give me something. Anything.

“Nothing happened to me. I did it to myself,” he grunts, grabbing the gauze next to me, “Well, Thatcher did the cutting, but I asked for it.”

“What? Why?” I furrow my eyebrows, confused.

When I’d first seen them, I’d thought the abuse from his father had escalated to more than just busted lips and black eyes. I hadn’t been expecting him to say one of his best friends.

Their relationships with one another are an enigma. It doesn’t matter how much they tell you, you would still never be able to comprehend the depths they would be willing to go for one another.

And Rook is the trickiest of them all.

A puzzle that only gets more confusing with added pieces.

But even still, I want to unravel him. To probe and decipher every part of him, searching for answers to his mystery every day, because that’s what he deserves.

Someone who would never give up the search in finding him.

With gentle movements, he wraps the gauze around my foot a few times, tying the ends together at the top when he is finished.

“It was a punishment,” he says, still fighting me before he returns the first aid kit back to where he grabbed it earlier. He comes back into the kitchen to lean against the counter across from me, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

“Why would Thatch need to punish you? What did you do to him?”

“Besides annoying the shit out of him? Nothing.” He tilts his head to the left, cracking his neck violently. “I wanted to punish myself. I wanted him to cut me. I could’ve done it on my own, but that felt selfish. So I let him do it.”

A cold chill racks my bones, and goosebumps scatter across my skin.

“For what?”

He looks me dead in the eyes, and even in the dark, they are still so fucking luminous.

“You.”

The emptiness in my chest throbs. I didn’t think it was possible for anything else inside of me to break, but something did. It shattered.

“I asked him to cut me because I needed to be punished for trusting you. For allowing myself to be weak.”

“Rook, I don’t understand,” I mutter.

“If my father taught me anything, it’s that we all have sins we have to answer for. Repercussion for our actions. I’d rather be in control of the punishment that happens to me for the things I’ve done.”

There are just some things that don’t deserve forgiveness, Sage.

All this time, he’d been hurting himself for what? Because he trusted me? Because of the things he’d done?

“That’s why you let him beat you?”

“I like the pain. I live for it.” He shrugs, and his admission slices me raw. He’s been going his entire life hurting himself just to pay for mistakes that he himself didn’t even make. He’s so damaged, so broken, that the pain was the only release he had.

“I don’t believe that. That can’t be the reason—”

“Because I killed my mother.” His nostrils flare. “Is that what you want me to tell you? Do you want that ugly, bitter fucking truth, Sage? I killed my mom.”

He releases a sober breath, raking his fingers through his hair. “We were on the way home from school. She was on the phone with my dad talking about picking up Thai food for dinner. It was such a normal day, I never thought something bad could happen on a day like that.” He shakes his head. “It’s not supposed to happen. Not to people like her.”

I sit there, frozen, absorbing every single word, feeling every single bit of his past inside my bones.

“I was being an asshole, kicking the back of her seat. And she turned around to scold me for it.” His gruff voice cracks a little. “There was no way for her to have seen the car in front of us hit their brakes. There wasn’t enough time to slow down. Everything was fuzzy because my head was hurting, but I remember someone had pulled me out of my car seat, carrying me to safety just before the entire vehicle went up in flames. It was consumed in an orange blaze and smoke, so much that I couldn’t even see her inside. I’d thought she’d made it out. That someone had saved her.”

That's what he's been carrying around on his shoulders most of his life. The sin he thought he'd committed. That is the root of all his pain, blaming himself for his mother's death.

"I did that." He pokes himself in the chest. "I took my mother's life, and I deserve to pay for that. So yeah, I let him beat me. But it's a small price to pay when I'm the reason he lost the love of his life."

I slide off the counter, walking towards him, not caring that he doesn't like me right now. Not caring about anything that happened before this moment right here.

When I was inside Monarch's facility, there was a young girl in one of my groups. She'd struggled with depression and severe self-harm, using her thighs and wrists to deal with the problems she had within herself.

It's a nasty battle to fight, especially when you're alone.

Rook, he'd been going to war against it, not even knowing who the enemy was.

But him letting his father hit him, making Alistair fight with him, having Thatcher cut him open, it's the same as her sitting in her room with a razor blade pressed into her skin. He wants to see the pain on the inside reflected on the outside.

He'd become addicted to self-inflicted wounds as a way to cope with the death of his mother, to cope with everything he'd ever lost. Including me.

"Rook," I almost whisper, reaching my fingers out to touch him, "you did not kill your mom. Was it a horrible accident? Yes, but that's exactly what it was. An accident."

With quick reflexes, he snatches my wrist in his hand, squeezing tightly,

"Don't make excuses for me. I know what I did." His jaw twitches as he grinds his teeth, and I catch one single tear leak from the corner of his eye. "I know what I am."

I use my other hand to touch it, the wet drop soaking the tip of my finger. A scorned angel, filled with so much anger and hatred, but on the inside, he's still that same angel. One that had lost everything when he was cast out of heaven, out of his father's good graces.

Because Rook hadn't just lost his mom, he'd lost his father that day too. Everything he'd once known had burned with that car, and he did the

best he could with what he had.

He built himself in the chaos and pain, feeling it was better to rule in the darkness than be damned in the light.

“You are human—that is what you are. One that feels pain and sorrow. One that does not deserve what you have been allowing others to put you through. You are not the devil, Rook.”

The walls crumble, and for the very first time, I see nothing but his vulnerability. His eyes are so pure and so raw that it takes my breath away. I see him for everything he is, and it’s so beautiful.

He drops my wrist, grabbing the back of my neck. He gathers my hair at the base and presses up, sewing his hand there. With little power, he drags me into his chest, holding me there, wrapping me in his smell.

“I never wanted to be,” he whispers.

It’s quiet.

For the first time in a long time.

There isn’t anything that needs to be said. No argument to win. I know the harsh reality that awaits us outside of this space, but it doesn’t need to come until morning. For right now, I let him hold me. I let myself fall for him.

Unabashedly in love even if I’ll never be able to say it out loud.

And it’s not perfect. It’s ugly, broken, and when the sun pierces the clouds, he very well could return to hating me. I know that.

But it’s us, and for right now, in this brutal moment of despair, that is enough.



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

when abel killed cain

rook

The Graveyard.

During the weekends, it's lively and reeks of illicit activities. It's where the rich kids get their fix, living life as dangerously as they can without reaping any consequences. The chaos amongst the crowd roars nearly as loud as the engines on the track.

It's a living, breathing beast that feeds off adrenaline.

Fights. Drugs. Sex.

The only place to find trouble when you're actively searching for it.

"I did not sign up to be the pack mule," Thatcher heaves as he helps Alistair drags Cain's unconscious body onto the empty track.

"Stop bitching," Alistair curses through gritted teeth.

Together, they drop him onto the asphalt, his unsupported head knocking against the hard ground, his eyes twitching as he starts to become more alert. The punch Alistair had delivered to the side of his head had been enough to knock him out, giving us just enough time to get him here with no issues—well, besides the fact he's dead weight and heavy.

Tonight, The Graveyard is vacant. But it still has that lingering smell of burnt rubber and oil that I love so much. It's a normal Wednesday, and everyone is out living their orderly lives, itching for when the time comes to escape here in the anarchy, but for us, the mayhem coexists in our everyday lives.

Tonight, The Graveyard is the altar for a monster who will be answering to his crimes. Even if he doesn't want to confess them willingly. He will pay the price for touching her with his life.

As he wakes up, he is instantly aware of his tethered predicament. The ropes knotting his hands and feet together keep him on the ground. And I

doubt he'll be able to slither away from me fast enough. He'd gotten away with his sick offense for too long already.

Alistair walks towards me, placing his hand on my shoulder. "He's all yours."

I bite down on the match in my mouth, my thumb tapping my thigh. I don't need his approval but appreciate his support.

Thatcher takes a deep breath, then spits onto Cain's chest before looking over at me. "You better make him bleed for trying to shoot me."

I scoff, smirking lightly as I shake my head.

Okay, so maybe grabbing Cain from his apartment hadn't gone that smoothly. He'd pulled a gun on Thatch, just before he'd been knocked out cold. And I have a feeling Thatcher isn't going to let it go anytime soon.

Cain tries to shout behind the duct tape on his mouth, only succeeding in reminding me that he's still breathing the same air as her. I'm caught between wanting him to die quickly and prolonging his torture for as long as his human body can take it.

I turn my head, seeing Silas. He stands still for a long time, just watching me before scooping a set of chains off the ground and reaching them towards me.

"Make him beg for it," he says simply, dropping the hefty links into my hands.

I nod, knowing what he's telling me without needing a full explanation. With a deep breath, I crack my neck, zeroing in on Cain's body.

He's not stupid—I can see him trying to calculate ways to get out of this. It makes this even better for me because it doesn't matter what solution he comes up with, there is no escaping me. I'm his reckoning.

Every time I look at him, the madness inside of me only stirs more violently. The pressure inside my head increases, and all I can see are images of a small version of Sage. Her tiny body curled into a tight cocoon as she cries silently into her sheets, feeling tainted and hollow.

All her dreams of the future, all the joy that comes from being blissfully unaware of the darkness that awaits you in life, it had all been stolen from her.

She needed a savior.

And when one never came, she became her own, forged from the wickedness that had been done to her. She became what she had to in order

to endure.

I—we—of all people know what that's like.

Better than anyone.

Sage doesn't need anyone to slay her demons. I know that.

But her inner child did, and even though she probably prayed for an angel instead of an angry man with horns, I'm still going to do what no one else had been able to.

Protect her.

My shoes thud against the track as I make my way to his body. I take my time to look him up and down before speaking.

"Before I take this tape off your mouth, I want to get a few questions out of the way." I squat down to the left of his head. "Why am I here? Well, Cain McKay, you're a filthy fucking pedophile."

His eyes widen, head immediately shaking as he tries to deny my claims against him.

"No, no." I tilt my head as I click my tongue. "Lying isn't going to help you. Nothing is going to help you. So when I take this off, don't waste your last words on trying to convince me otherwise."

I reach into my back pocket, pulling out two of the items I'd brought specifically for this moment. One of them is my Zippo, and the other is a set of pliers that I jacked from Thatcher's collection of tools.

He's not going to be happy that they are about to get very, very dirty.

"Let's see, what else...Don't do this, blah, blah. You don't need to do this, blah—oh!" I tap his chest with the pliers. "What are you going to do to me? Good question, Cain. That's my favorite."

I flick my Zippo, the satisfying swoosh filling the air, making my fingers tingle with anticipation.

The flame burns steady, never wavering, patient.

"I'm going kill you." I look him straight in the eyes as I say it because even though he doesn't deserve to go out like a man, I want him to see just how dark my soul is. I want him to know that this is going to be painful.

"Now that we've answered all those questions—" I tear the tape from his mouth harshly. "—let's get to work."

As I excepted, he starts to scream, so high and nasally it makes my ears ring.

“So we’re screaming, huh?” I open my mouth, expanding my lungs and releasing a thundering shout. Mine is full of rage and hunger, while his drips with fear. The mixture together in the air makes me grin.

“You grew up here, Cain—don’t die stupid. You know that it doesn’t matter how loud it gets at The Graveyard. No one is coming for you.”

It takes a moment for him to stop yelling, but I’m in the mood to be patient tonight. I look down at the badge on his chest, the one attached to a silver chain, and I lift it up, tugging the necklace until it snaps from his neck.

“You don’t take a man’s badge, you fucking punk,” he hisses, voice cracked from using it too much.

“You’re not a goddamn man. You’re a disgusting pig who preys on little girls,” I spit. “So I’ll take whatever the fuck I want.”

I pocket it into my hoodie, leaving it there along with an idea of what I’m going to do with it after this is over.

“Is that what she told you?” He laughs shakily. “She has done just about everything to get more attention than Rose. Including lie. That’s what she does, she lies. Puts on a big show so she can have the world eating at her feet. You’re just another pawn in her game.”

I grind my teeth, drawing the line at talking badly about a victim he’d abused. I’m not going to allow him to talk about her like that.

He will never be able to even mutter her name again.

“What did I say about lying, Cain?” I slam my palm into his forehead, banging his head against the asphalt.

“They will come for her. It doesn’t matter if you kill me or not. They know she is involved. They will not let any of you out of this alive.”

I use the pliers to snatch his tongue, pressing down on the grip so it squeezes the wet sponge before I pull it from his mouth.

“Let them. They will meet the same fate,” I hiss. “And I hope they send more than just you next time.”

Flipping my Zippo again, I drag the flame to his tongue. Naturally, he starts to struggle, trying to run away from the heat, but I drop my knee onto his chest, digging my kneecap into his body so hard that I know it’s difficult for him to breathe.

The Zippo burns his saliva quickly, drying up the tissue before the scorching process kicks in. The direct flame to the pink muscle makes it

fester up, shifting the color to a flaccid white color. He howls in excruciating misery.

“There are thousands of nerve endings I’m roasting off right now, and that’s not even a fraction of what you caused her,” I add insult to injury, my body staying steady while I sear his flesh.

The smell is rancid, but I love it.

Pus pockets start to boil up, their yellow fluid beginning to leak from too much heat too fast. It leaks down his throat, choking him on his own infection. Tears leak from his eyes as he kicks his legs, still fighting against me.

But there is nothing he can do.

I’m the flame that never goes out, and I will not stop until he is nothing but ash.

Once the muscle starts to turn black, I pull the lighter back, feeling how hot the metal is against my own palm, but I use that short burst of pain to fuel my pursuit for revenge.

Pieces of his tongue drop onto his chin, literal pieces of melted tissue dripping onto his neck.

I stand up, tossing the pliers and placing my lighter back into my jeans. Leaving him to suffer while I take my time walking towards the chains and single padlock, I whistle lowly as I grab them from the ground.

They clink and jangle as I drag them across the track behind me.

Cain whines and tries to roll away, battling against fate, still not grasping how this is going to end. I suppose I can understand; when you’re staring death in the face, it’s only natural to look away.

I just can’t believe this town and the people they put up on thrones. Crowning the crooked and evil.

Meanwhile, they had vilified me as a child.

Hiding away a rapist. Covering up sex traffickers, for fuck’s sake.

And yet, the boy who’d watched his mother burn alive right in front of him, he was the antagonist. He was Lucifer. He was the villain.

Not tonight.

“G-God, pl-ple-ease,” he grumbles, asking for service from a holy spirit while he’d been committing such hellish acts.

It’s hypocritical, and it pisses me off.

“He isn’t listening,” I grunt, taking one end of the irons and starting to wrap a figure eight around his crossed legs. “He has left you to deal with me now.”

Once I’ve looped them around enough times, I slap the padlock over the brackets, locking them into place. I look down at my work like a proud Eagle Scout who had just scored his first knot badge.

I stand over him one more time, my feet on either side of his body. Just watching him as he shakes with tears, rocking his head back and forth, silently pleading with me, my eyebrow cocks, and I scoff as I see a large wet stain spread across his jeans.

“Are you ready?” I ask, tilting my head playfully. “Hell has been waiting.”

Backing away from his body, I turn around as I hold the other end of the chains in my left hand, feeling every single bit of wickedness as I make my way to my bike.

Once I get there, I click the grappling hook that is connected to the end of the links on the frame of my bike, looking back at him just to see what he looks like intact one last time, before I climb on and start my engine.

Adrenaline pounds against my skull like a drum. My legs vibrate with the force of what’s beneath me. I briefly glance to the side, seeing all the guys leaning against the chain-link fence, watching me with unwavering stares.

I look ahead of me, to the four turns in the track, knowing Cain probably won’t survive one lap but silently hoping he does so his suffering is prolonged.

Twisting my wrist backwards shoots fuel straight to the engine, and my bike propels forward. It takes only a few seconds before the slack in the chain gives, and I can feel the weight of Cain’s body being dragged behind me.

His screams last longer than I expected, but I drown them out with thoughts of her.

The other night I’d allowed myself to be soft. In the hushed space of that moment, my guard had fallen completely in front of Sage, and a part of me wished I could stay there for longer. Inside the cracks of the chaos, where there was a sense of peace.

I could still feel her warm skin pressed firmly into my body as we stood in the kitchen. It wasn't sexual. It didn't even feel physical.

It was something deep, deep inside of me that was being coaxed out, comforted by the smell of her freshly washed hair. It was the closest I'd ever been to forgiveness. And even though it would take more than one shadowy night in a kitchen to heal my inner wounds, to help me overcome my demons and learn to forgive myself, it was enough at that moment.

However, I couldn't stay there. Not forever. I don't live in a world where that was possible.

It didn't matter what we were. What had happened that night or how soft I'd been. Because right now, I'm every single bit of my reputation. A grotesque, vile soul that's starved for vengeance. That's all I care about.

Making sure no one would ever taint her wings ever again.

My breathing is erratic by the time I cross the finish line, slowing to a stop where I'd once started. My pulse jumps inside my throat as I knock the kickstand down, leaving the engine purring.

Cain's body had rolled as I drove, bounced, and ricocheted off the pavement from the force of the pulling. I'm surprised to see all of his limbs still attached to his torso. As I draw closer, I can see just how much damage the unforgiving payment had done.

A long, thick trail of blood and skin marks the path behind him, winding all the way around the track. Portions of his scalp are peeled away from the bone, sagging from his head. I bend down, examining his trembling and disfigured form.

His clothes had been yanked and shredded from the road rash; uncovered flesh had been singed from the friction. A part of his tibia had splintered through the skin, the fleshy white bone punching out. Extensive patches of torn tissue and muscle are dispersed across his entire frame, but I can still see his chest trying to rise and fall.

It doesn't feel like enough, but the human body can only handle so much. If I could, I would repair him over and over again, just to find new ways to tear him apart.

"P-Pl-Plea..." He gurgles, suffocating and choking on the crimson liquid that pours from inside his lungs. Drowning.

A surge of victory washes over me.

Silas had asked one thing of me.

Make him beg for it, and I'd done just that.

I'd brought him through so much misery that he's imploring for death,
but as Thatcher likes to say, death must be earned.

“One last lap.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

time to pick a side

sage

It's just one day. You can handle one day.

I tell myself this knowing I've been through harder things than this. I had spent months of my life trapped inside of a psych ward, where I'd been mistreated and abused. I'd lost my twin sister to a gruesome murder, and I had gone through the worst thing imaginable as a young girl.

I had survived all of these traumatic things, and yet, this Spring Luncheon in celebration of my father feels like the last straw for me.

"Sage," I hear, prepared to settle into another dull conversation with another person who didn't care about a word I had to say.

It's the same thing for each new group of people.

How are you?

How is college treating you? What are you majoring in?

Some of them slide in a joke they think is original about how college is the best years of your life. My father would occasionally compliment my academic excellence and talk about how bright my future was going to be.

But I can see in their eyes what they really want to ask me. They don't care about any of this.

They want to know if I'm mentally stable, how I am with Rosie being gone, how losing my mother had affected me as a woman. I can read them; they're paper-thin in this light. But instead of actually asking me, they keep quiet, waiting to draw their own conclusions when I leave.

I blink, turning my head to see Conner Godfrey, my school counselor, standing next to me with a smile on his face and a glass of champagne.

"You look miserable, and I thought this might help."

"Thank you," I say simply, pressing the edge of the champagne glass to my lips.

Attending this ridiculous event had not been my idea. It had been a stipulation when I'd talked to Cain at the church. I hadn't found out any new information, and in order to stay in his good graces, I was to show up, wear something pretty, and play the role of the supportive daughter.

"I didn't know you were friends with my father," I say, making conversation, not wanting to assume anything about him, but also confused as to why he's here. From what I know about him, he lives quietly with his wife and two children, having only moved here a few years ago.

"We've chatted in passing. Stephen and I went to graduate school together," he says, smiling charmingly. "He actually got me the job at Hollow Heights. I didn't necessarily come from a family with this kind of wealth."

"I wouldn't have thought that with the last name Godfrey."

"I hear that more often than you would think."

Not able to stop myself and not caring either way, I speak my mind.

"Was Stephen always a pompous asshole?" I look over at him, watching as he keeps the smile on his face and chuckles.

"He has always been..." He thinks for a moment. "Driven. But no, there were times, believe it or not, that he would stumble into our shared apartment piss drunk. But his father was very strict with him about taking over the family business. I think over the years he has just done what we all strive to do—make our parents proud."

He's right. I don't believe Stephen is capable of anything other than poise and discipline. However, it would seem he passed that tradition down to his son, turning him into another man fueled by toxic masculinity and entitlement.

"Not all of us strive for that," I say honestly. "Sometimes it's the opposite."

I have no reason to lie or uphold an image. And while I wouldn't run around screaming my father is involved in a sex trafficking ring and is the reason my sister died, in order to protect Rook, I won't pretend to like him. Not anymore.

This makes him pause for a second before he nods, accepting my answer and taking it much better than anyone else would.

"We all have something that drives us, and it doesn't matter what it is, as long as it makes us better people in the end."

“That’s good advice. Ever thought about being a counselor?” I quirk an eyebrow up at him, smirking, and he grins, showing off his white smile.

I may not know fully who I am or what I want for myself—I don’t think that’s the point anymore, because we are supposed to grow, to change, to heal—but I do know what drives me.

It’s to make sure I never become like them, all those people surrounding me. I refused to become what they want me to be. I’ll never allow anyone to try and mold me into the image they picture ever again.

And that feels far more important than not knowing who I am.

“There you are,” I hear my father say. “My beautiful daughter. I got that dress for you in Paris on your sixteenth birthday, didn’t I?”

I glance down at the Hepburn-style black chiffon dress. It melts against me because it had been custom-made for my body and also from the heat of being outside all day. I knew the long sleeves were going to make me sweat, but I suppose when short sleeves and spaghetti straps are out of the question, you work with what you have.

Plus, I’d worn this dress for a reason.

“Don’t give yourself that kind of credit. Rosemary bought this for me.” I look back up at him with a look so harsh, it could slit his throat.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” Conner says before clearing his throat.
“Sage, it was lovely talking to you.”

I watch him disappear into the party, leaving me alone with my dad for the first time in over a year.

I look at Frank in his dusty-pink blazer and cream slacks, ashamed that I’m even related to this man. It feels wrong to stand by his side, showing my encouragement, while I know who he is underneath.

A murderer. A fraud. A money-hungry swine.

This is one role I don’t want to act out anymore. My family died the day Rosie did, and when this is all said and done, I want to have all ties severed from my Donahue lineage.

“You don’t have to make this so hard, Sage,” he breathes, opening the door to the backyard. “I’m still your dad.”

I look over at him, not able to put away my look of disgust.

“My dad?” I scoff. “A father is a man who would do anything to protect the family he built. You are a cheap, weak man with absolutely no backbone. You are nothing to me except the man who murdered my sister.”

I search his eyes for any form of regret or sadness, but I see nothing. He'd done nothing but given me half his chromosomes and ruin my life. That's it. And soon, he won't even be that.

He'll be a corpse.

"Ah, I see you've found her!" Stephen Sinclair makes his appearance, a smile on his face as he comes into my space as if he is allowed and kisses me on the cheek. "It's so good to see you, it's been too long. I'm sorry I haven't stopped by to chat on campus. With all the disruptions last semester, I've been putting out fires left and right."

I lift the left side of my mouth in a half-smirk, not missing the implied statement about literal fires that had been started. I'm not sure of Stephen's involvement in all of this, but I would be naive to think he wasn't at least aware of what Rook and his friends were up to.

"With great power comes great responsibility," I say mockingly.

"Quoting Voltaire. I always told Easton you were too smart for your own good. I hate that things couldn't work out between the two of you. You were so good together."

Didn't work out? That's what he's going with?

I mean if anyone was thankful for ending the relationship with Easton, it was me, but didn't work out?

He acts as if he didn't blacklist me the second I was hauled off to the loony bin. My mental health episode would have been a stain on his family's reputation, and he couldn't have that.

"It's from Spider man, actually." I tilt my head, taking a sip of my drink. "Mary is much smarter than me. I think they make a much better fit than we did. He is much more docile."

I knew where the quote originated from, but I'm in the mood to be a smartass. He, along with his family, don't deserve an ounce of my respect.

Stephen isn't the only person in this space that can play dirty. If he wants to take digs, he better get a fucking shovel, because I guarantee my hole will be deeper than his at the end. I lost a lot of things this year; my razor-sharp tongue was not one of them.

He laughs, and it actually sounds real. Like me challenging him is the most humorous thing he's experienced in years.

"Maybe you're right," he says, sobering up a bit. "However, I've got some business that needs attending to on the East Coast in the next few

weeks. I've asked your father to join Easton and me. I think you should really think about coming along. It might be a nice little vacation, and maybe you and Easton could rekindle."

My brain goes to high alert. It's no longer a game of who can outwit who.

What is he doing with my father?

I cross my arms in front of me suspiciously. "Business?" I ask, trying to keep my voice light as I look between the two of them. "What business? You're the dean of a college. I thought your business would consist of budgeting tuition and meal planning school lunches."

He looks at me carefully. "I wasn't aware you were so interested in the inner workings of what I do, Sage. Plan on taking my job one day?"

"Just keeping my options open."

I'm onto you, I want to say.

And by the way his body language shifts, just a little, I can tell he knows it.

So help me God, if I find out he was involved in what happened to Rosie, there would be no waiting like we're doing with my father.

I'll kill him in front of the police department and handcuff myself.

"If you must know," he exhales, "it's a funding opportunity. We're looking into more scholarship donations so that bright, young students from underprivileged homes can attend without worrying about the financial burden. Like your friend Briar."

I slit my eyes when he says her name. He is so full of shit it's starting to leak out of his ears. The Sinclair men are a handful of generational assholes.

"How very humanitarian of you, Stephen," I say. "This has been nice, catching up, but I've got to run to the little girls' room." I tip my champagne glass up at both of them before turning on the ball of my foot and heading in the opposite direction.

I walk away from him and towards the French doors, where all the waitstaff are filtering through.

They all look miserable walking around in their white waistcoats and silver trays. I recognize one of them as one of the guys that had trapped me, Briar, and Lyra at the Gauntlet.

It's not a rare occurrence for people from West Trinity Falls to work for the people in Ponderosa Springs. To them, they're just our servants, the people who pick up after our messes. It's strange that I had never noticed that before, just how many of them worked for the rich, trying to provide a life for themselves.

I can only imagine what they think of us. I bet they sit around and talk about how lucky we are, how easy we have it, and to some degree, they're probably right.

But tragedy does not discriminate against the poor and the rich. It comes for everyone, and it does not care if you live in a mansion or a roach-filled apartment. It eats at us all.

With no rush to return to the party, I wander around the halls. I know this house like it's my own, having spent more time here growing up than I would have liked.

I walk into the study, my fingers gliding across the dusty books before I walk onto the terrace. I stand still, looking down from my place on the second floor at all the guests mingling around on the back lawn. A clear representation of everything I despised about my upbringing.

I can smell the fresh floral arrangements in the breeze, bouquets of hydrangeas, violets, and orchids. All of them are placed elegantly around the spacious, green lawn, the setting sun reflecting the color on their petals.

Large white canopies are strategically set up to shield guests while they eat. The circular dining tables were decorated flawlessly by some designer that would never actually get the credit for it. All the women in their oversized hats and men in their suit jackets add to the aesthetic like perfectly arranged ornaments.

Everything is in order. There are no children running around gleefully soaking in the sun or laughter that rings too loud.

It's all orchestrated to sound and look like wealth.

All of these familiar faces that I grew up around yet had never had one single genuine conversation with any of them. I see Lizzy standing next to her mother and father and wonder if the night before he'd stumbled in drunk and smelling of another woman's perfume. I'm curious if she's still hiding who she really is beneath that tailored white dress.

Every influential name in Ponderosa Springs is in attendance today, all here to celebrate my father's re-election.

One that he'd secured with pity and blood-soaked money.

As I stare at them with their jewelry and designer clothes, it feels like the first time I'm seeing them for what they all are. One big mirage of success and happiness. From a distance, you might see a life people would dream of, but in reality, when you get close, the picture becomes clearer.

It's all an act.

A show they put on while they're busy digging holes six feet deep to bury their secrets inside of. Shoving all of their skeletons, crooked ways, and nasty scandals into the grave, leaving the ground to soak up all that wickedness.

I don't believe in ghosts or hauntings.

But if any town is cursed by the wrongdoings of its civilians, it's Ponderosa Springs. It forces the soil to absorb their evil, enriching the ground with sinister fertilizer. It's now so apparent to me that I can feel it as I walk around.

"I kissed you for the first time right there."

Repulsion hits me like a bus.

"You threatened to cut my hair with scissors if I didn't," I say as I turn around to look at Easton. He's wearing a starched button-down and navy slacks, his blond hair combed back neatly, achieving an effortless kind of handsome, one that I would be able to acknowledge if I didn't already know how awful of a human he was.

"We remember things differently, it seems," he quips, shoving his hands deep into his pockets.

"We remember a lot of things differently."

There's so much history between the two of us, matched for a relationship before we even knew what that meant. When we were young, he was different. We got along as friends. He was funny and smart, always coming up with something to do. Climbing trees, riding bikes, getting ice cream.

We grew up together.

And I'm not sure when he changed, when he became what he is now.

We'd gone from friends since birth to standing here as enemies.

Maybe things would have gone differently had I been able to love him. Maybe I wouldn't have fought this life as hard as I did. Maybe I would

have given in and become what he needed, but even as a young teenager, I knew I didn't want that for myself.

I take a sip of my bubbly drink. "What happened to your face?"

A gaudy bandage is attached to the left side of his face, protecting some type of wound from infection.

He grinds his teeth, reaching up to touch the gauze and sucking his teeth. "I thought you were done playing dumb, Sage?"

I furrow my eyebrows, not having a clue what he is talking about.

"You really don't know?" he asks, scoffing a little. "Rook, your psychotic fuck buddy, burnt half my face off. It took two skin grafts to fix, and even still, I'll be walking around like a freak."

"Why do I get the feeling you did something to deserve it?"

I start to walk away when I feel Easton's hand grab my forearm, hauling me in close into his space. My balance is thrown slightly, making me lean onto his chest.

There are flashes of our past relationship that hit me like whiplash, and on instinct, I want to break his fingers for touching me.

He has no right.

He never did, and I'm ashamed that at one point I thought he did.

His mouth dips close to my ear, making me sick to my stomach. "We used to be good together. We were happy. You can still have that, Sage. The lifestyle you've always wanted, the attention, the notoriety. You can still have all of that. All you have to do is come back to me."

There's nothing to come back to because there was never anything I'd left. Everything I was with Easton was a fake. A fraud. A person I had to be in order to get through the pressure of living in this town.

"Let go of me, Easton." I grind out.

For a second, there is a brief moment where I see the boy I used to know. The one I used to be friends with. Before he woke up one day a different person, a man who thought I was property, one who only cared for how he was perceived.

"There was a time when you begged me to touch you, Sage Donahue. A time before Rook, before all of this. You know me, you grew up with me. I know that we could be happy, if you'd just let me in. Let me show you."

Panic hits me as he moves closer, my arm trying to jerk away from his hold, but his grip only tightens.

“You better take your hands off her, Sinclair.” I know that voice.
“Before you get the other side of your face melted off.”

Rook.

His presence is a dark cloud on this warm day, and I’m surprised how badly I missed the shade. The way he leans against the entryway, arms crossed, defying my expectations of just how far he is willing to go in order to cause chaos.

While Rook’s father is in attendance as he is for most of these gatherings, his son had never once shown his face amongst this kind of crowd. He doesn’t conform to this society they all live in. The one I had lived in.

I jerk my arm away from Easton, stepping away from him.

“Heard about your accident, Toasty. Gotta learn to be more careful around bikes—they get hot.” Rook smirks, only pouring fuel on the already roaring flames.

My heart jumps a little as I look at him.

His silver chain necklace catches the sunlight, my attention directed to his exposed chest, where a few buttons of his shirt are undone. The ink adorning his skin is partially visible, enough to make me lick my lips, enough to make me want more.

He arches one dark eyebrow, letting me know he is very aware I’m eye fucking him.

The dark purple dress shirt stretched across his broad shoulders, the black slacks to match straining against the toned muscles in his thighs—it’s not something I’m accustomed to him wearing. But it’s starting to become something I could get used to.

“Aw,” Easton pouts. “Still jealous I fucked her first, or are you still upset that she’s here where she belongs instead of playing pretend with you?”

Rook pushes himself off the doorframe, moving into the space, filling up the room with his presence. I don’t miss the way Easton backs up as he does.

“That’s where you’re misunderstanding, Sinclair,” he says. “She’s never had to pretend to enjoy anything with me.”

His rebellion makes me ache.

He'd gone his entire life being told he was the devil. It was a role he'd accepted, one that could shield him from his pain and the rest of the world. He would always be that; that would never change.

And I had learned to accept the demons inside of him.

However, it doesn't mean he isn't capable of more.

Easton turns to me. "Is that the life you want? Slumming it? Being an outcast? I know you don't want that for yourself, Sage. Pick me, you know I'm right. You choose me and all your problems disappear, but if you go with him, I can't guarantee you won't be caught in the crossfire."

I've been told since I came back about how I'd fallen from grace. How I'd become someone completely different than who I used to be. But I think that's because I'm becoming the person I was always meant to be.

And I want to do that, standing next to the person I was always meant to be with.

This moment is my eternal damnation origin story. Instead of hiding it, I acknowledge for the first time publicly what it is I want. I show him exactly what it is I want for myself.

I walk quietly past Easton, knowing my actions will be enough to give him his answer. I feel his judgmental eyes smite me as I'm cast out of their self-righteous heaven once again.

But they could not throw me from a place I descended from willingly. Not this time.

I stand next to Rook, unsure of what my place beside him means but knowing I want to be there either way.

I look over at him, hellfire eyes blazing, knowing that if he were to tumble from the heavens again, falling like lightning from the sky, I would be the thunder that chased after him. I would stay there with him, in eternal flames as long as it was his fire that licked my body.

He is my Lucifer, and it's time for me to show him I could be his Lilith.



CHAPTER THIRTY

punishment

rook

I've never been afraid of anything.

I told myself that if fear ever arose, I would face it head-on with a smile and a match.

But as soon as an ounce of trepidation came for me, I did the complete opposite. I turned in the other direction, and I ran.

I've never been afraid of anything.

Until her.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

The billiard room door shuts behind her loudly, trapping us inside the teakwood-smelling space. I hear the fireplace crack, needing to be stoked, but I ignored it.

"What kind of man am I if I let you show up to your father's celebration party without a date?" I ask jokingly.

"Rook," she scolds, arms crossed in front of her in defense.

I hadn't planned on showing up.

But that fear had started to fester. It's such a rare emotion that I knew it almost immediately.

I thought about her father being here, Easton, all the people that she once surrounded herself with like a shield who had turned their backs, and I wasn't afraid of what they would do to her. They are weak. Cowards.

I was nervous about what she might do to them.

What would happen if her father pushed her a bit too far, if Easton had continued what I know he wanted to do in that room. I know the tidal waves of emotions that are coursing through her, how much of her patience is being tested by being here. All it would take is one tiny flint, and she would become an unstoppable wildfire.

Scorching anything and everyone in her path.

I can feel it.

Her anger. Her cracked self-restraint. Her despair.

So I thought, what better way to feed the animosity inside of her than give her exactly what it was she's craving.

"There is something I need to tell you. A few things."

I walk in her direction, taking my time, making her wonder what it is I'm up to. She watches me with skeptical eyes, which doesn't surprise me. I'm known for my unpredictability.

"And it couldn't wait until later?"

A smirk breaks onto my face, my feet stopping once they're touching the tips of her heels. The smell of her perfume hits me straight in the face, making my groin ache.

"That's all we've been doing, TG," I say in a hushed tone, pulling the match from my mouth. "Waiting to make our move, waiting out the feds, waiting to kill your father."

I dip the red tip of the match towards her skin, dragging the rough end across her collarbone just where her scar sits. The same one I wear on my own.

The one I gave myself so that fate would know we were in this life together.

She's nervous.

I can feel it rolling off her in waves as she stands there wondering what I could possibly be up to this time. Am I going to hurt her? Am I going to end this once and for all? And my personal favorite, am I going to touch her?

"I'm done waiting."

"What about the police? What about Cain?" Her eyebrows furrow in worry, but her eyes are burning with excitement.

"That's been handled," I breathe, drawing a line from her scar towards the center of her chest. "Nothing is stopping us now."

"Is that what you came to tell me?"

"That's one of the things."

"And the other?"

I enjoy the times I could catch her like this.

Cheeks flushed and unsure of herself. It's only me who can make her this anxious. I want the world to see her as the strong woman she is. As a fucking force to be dealt with.

It makes me hard watching the way people cower around her. Even if she doesn't see it for herself, I do. Regardless of the power she thinks she lost, people still fear her, and I fucking love that about her.

I love that I'm the only one who can break her. The only one that's able to crawl beneath her skin and bury myself inside of it.

My hands descend onto her body, slipping beneath the globes of her ass and picking her up smoothly, hauling her up to my waist.

Her mouth parts barely, a gasp falling from her lips.

"Wh-hat are you doing?"

I walk her towards the pool table, resting her on the edge of the soft green felt material.

"Apologizing," I mutter, putting an inch of space between us, staring at her hard.

"Rook, there is nothing you need to apologize for."

Taking my time, I drop one knee to the floor with a thud, the other one following suit, preparing for what it is I need to do. I pull my hands down her legs, cradling her calves in my palm and using my thumb to massage her gently.

"There is," I say, looking up at her from my place on the ground.

My altar.

My salvation.

"For not believing in you, for not believing in us. For not seeing through the lie and fighting to keep you, as I should have." I open the buttons on my shirt, pulling it down my shoulders and letting it fall to the ground.

"Make it hurt. Make me pay."

I had been so consumed with my own fear of being betrayed, of being hurt, of losing her, that I let myself hate her. I didn't go with what my heart had been trying to tell me all along—that she was different.

That she was mine.

I let myself hate her, and she went through hell alone because of it.

This is the only way I know how to make amends with that.

I wait for a second before I feel the tip of her heel beneath my chin, lifting my head up. I look up at her, quirking an eyebrow, my eyes on hers.

She oozes control, her shoulders tall as she stares down at me.

My phoenix.

“I don’t need your pain, Rook Van Doren. I want you to give me your word.”

I’ve never wanted anything more than I want her right now. I want to fucking devour her. I would do anything to have it.

“Tell me what it is,” I say, “and it’s yours. It’s all yours, baby.”

Like a seductress, she pulls both her legs up onto the table, spreading them wide, causing her dress to hike up her hips, leaving her fully exposed to me.

“I want you to promise me you will stop hurting yourself.”

The air is thick and heavy on my burning lungs. Her sweet aroma is enough to drown in, making me dizzy and lightheaded. I follow her pale fingers as they find her center, rubbing up and down her covered slit teasingly.

“You want to make it up to me? You want to touch me, pyro?”

I would pray to God to be able to touch her right now.

“Then promise me. No more cuts. No more pain.” She presses harder on her cunt, a little whimper slipping from her mouth. “Promise you’ll come to me. We can help each other. I can help you.”

A dark, wet spot appears on her thin panties, and my mouth waters, my chest aches. Her breasts move up and down in a steady rhythm as her breath starts to come out more erratically.

Lust and heartache swirl around my head.

Could she be enough to lead me to forgiveness? Could she be enough to help me let go?

I’m not a fool. I don’t believe in fairy tales, and for the longest time, I refused to indulge myself in the twisted delusional of her loving me back.

But the pain I chase is nothing compared to the pain of not being able to touch her. Not being able to have her. I could learn to forgive myself, but I don’t want to be without her.

Not again.

“It won’t be pretty,” I say, my voice husky. “My pain is an ugly, consuming beast, Sage. Can you handle something like that?”

“You’re not the only person who hurts themselves when it gets too much, Rook.”

I follow her hands as she removes them from her center, reaching behind herself to unzip the dress that shields her from me. She takes her time undressing, pulling her arms from the sleeves and shoving the black material down until it’s bunched around her waist.

I roll my tongue across my bottom lip as she seductively pulls it from her legs, tossing it onto the floor with her foot when she’s done. My eyes can’t figure out where to look first. The kindling blue of her eyes, the delicate curves that roll over her hips, or her supple tits that are the perfect shade of dusty pink, begging for my mouth.

She had been my greatest heartache. The one who had ripped a hole so deep inside of me that I never thought I’d be able to fill it. I’d gotten used to the hollow valley inside my soul.

But she’s also my only salvation.

The only altar I’d ever dare to worship.

I finally find where I want to look, because she drops her arms in front of her, baring the off-white scars that lie there.

They start at the base of her wrist, traveling vertically up her arms until they stop just below the bend in her elbow.

“My dad made a choice, and so did I,” she breathes. “He wanted to keep me, but I wanted to make sure he didn’t get either of us. We don’t have to hurt alone, Rook.”

I stand up.

She will never be able to lead me to the Garden of Eden or Heaven’s pearly gates. It’s too late for that.

But we could create our own peace. Our own salvation on our terms. Our own celestial city in the kingdom of eternal flames.

I grab her wrists, curling my fingers around, examining the sunken skin. All those stitches, all that blood she must have lost. She was all alone, so fucking miserable that she wanted to end it all. I never would have seen her again. I would have lost her for good.

It feels like a swift kick to the balls, a harsh stabbing in my gut.

“You’re not a flightless bird anymore, Sage. You’re a phoenix. They tried to snuff you out, but you wouldn’t let them. You built yourself from those ashes with no help from me or anyone else. Just you.”

I reach into my front pocket, pulling out the dainty golden chain, and the bird in the middle catches the light.

“Dying is easy. Can you burn for me?”

I’m not just asking.

I’m begging.

She reaches out, grabbing the charm that hangs, and rubs her finger across the plated winged creature.

“Where did you get this?” she whispers, a single tear streaming down her cheek, and I have the carnal urge to lick it from her. To catch her sadness and swallow it all up so she never has to feel it again.

“I melted it down from Cain’s badge,” I say. “As a reminder that he will never be able to touch you again. No one will. Not unless you let them.”

I see the question in her eyes. She wants to know what happened, what I did, but she knows it’s better left unsaid right now.

I take the metal and loop it around her neck, hooking it in the back so it falls perfectly in the center of her collarbone. She looks down at it, staring for a moment, and at first I’m unsure if she likes it. It is a gruesome gift.

But when she looks back up at me, her lips slightly parted, she gives me her answer,

“Rook, I’d like you to touch me now.”

I don’t need her to say anything else. It’s the only permission I need.

I bring my body to hers, crawling on top of the table and mounting her. My waist is in between her milky thighs, and I drop my mouth onto hers, taking in the red color of her mouth until she’s swollen from my kisses.

She moans into me as our tongues wrap together, devouring one another, pouring every single bit of raw emotion into each other’s mouths. All the torment, all the suffering alone, all the love.

My chest hurts. My heart is throbbing, coming alive for the first time in over a year. It feels good to reward myself instead of the opposite. These molten hot chains that had been clinging to my body for years start to unshackle themselves.

Needy, wanting, and every bit of mine.

I move my mouth down, unsure if the sensitive skin on her neck tastes more like strawberries or honey, but either way, the flavor on my tongue is

one I never wanted to forget.

The farther down I work, the more purple and red marks I leave across her. I want to mark every single square inch of her until she's covered in me. I would never go another day not letting the entire goddamn world know that she is mine.

"Your mouth feels so good," she whimpers as my hands grope her breasts. Soft and perky, warm and inviting to my prying fingers. I play tortuously with her nipples.

I'd gone too long denying the truth that she had always been mine. And now I'm going insane at the thought of possessing her completely, owning every inch.

"It's about to feel even better," I whisper, leaving a lingering kiss just above her panties. "Fuck, I missed this."

"Me or?"

"You. I missed tasting you," I move my mouth around her naked body, "I missed fucking you, I've thought of nothing else since you left. I've touched no one else. It's just fucking you."

I roll the waistband down, her underwear off her legs in one clean sweep.

I am absolutely famished for her. My mouth waters at the sight of her glistening, pink pussy, wet and ready for me. I'd been denying myself of her cunt on my tongue for too long. I want my fix.

Placing my body between her legs, forcing her thighs to widen in order to make room for my shoulders, I swipe my tongue from the top of her mound to her opening. She jerks against me, trying to push her leaking center to my face, chasing the friction, chasing the pleasure.

Happy to oblige, I drop my mouth to her clit, sucking on the sensitive bud with just enough pressure for her to feel it. I slowly circle the tip of my tongue around it, teasing both of us. I'm only able to play for a few seconds before I begin to devour the forbidden fruit between her thighs.

Her fingers sink into my hair, pushing me farther into the center, aching for more. My hot tongue flicks and swirls through her slick folds, and I inhale her like she's my last meal on earth.

With two of my fingers, I use her juices to easily slide them inside of her tight hole, feeling her clench around me as I work them in and out of her channel.

“All the sloppy noises for me?” I groan into her sex, my voice vibrating against her sensitive bud. “How fucking sweet of you, baby.”

I flatten my tongue against her clit, letting her grind against me, allowing her to control the pressure and rhythm. Letting her use me until she’s ready to break.

Little wrinkles form in her brow, her moans coming out harder, her entire body writhing and coiling, spine rising from the table. My cock is heavy and throbbing, desperate to feel her walls clamp around me.

I know she’s close.

I always know.

Because I know my girl.

I feel her juices streaming down my chin, coating me in her liquid, so holy it might be enough to cleanse the world of its sins. With my free hand, I smear her lubricant down towards her ass, massaging the tight hole with the pad of my finger.

“You gonna be a good whore and let me fuck this hole too?”

Part of me is teasing.

The other part of me is feral to claim every hole with zero restraint.

She whimpers, nodding her head as I continue to play, pushing the tip of my finger inside and groaning at how tight it is.

“Say it. Ask me.”

Lifting herself up on her elbows, face red with pleasure, she looks down at me between her thighs.

“I want you to fuck my ass.” Her blue eyes are filled with so much need that I can’t say no to her. “Please.”

“Fuck,” I groan as I make my way back up to her lips, shoving my tongue inside of her mouth and allowing her to taste herself on me. “I’m so goddamn weak for you, Sage.”

I take my hand down my body, removing myself from my pants, and sit up on my knees. Wrapping my palm around myself and pumping my length, I watch as a few drops of pre-come leak from the tip.

“Rook, please, baby. I need you,” she moans, rubbing herself against me.

Carefully, I spread her legs much wider, pulling her flush against my thighs, then slide my hands beneath her ass to lift it up towards me.

Instinctively, her legs come down to rest on my shoulders, her heels still decorating her feet.

I use her sleekness to lube my cock before guiding myself to her asshole.

“You let anyone else fuck you here, slut?” I ask, grinding my teeth as I ease myself inside of her. I feel her walls try to force me out, rejecting my size, but I keep pushing.

“N-no, no, only you.” She shakes her head aggressively, eyes shut tight as she struggles to fit me. “Fuck, it burns.”

I use my thumb to stimulate her clit, trying to ease her open.

“You gotta relax, baby girl. Let me in,” I whisper, inching inside farther and farther the more I fuck her clit with my thumb. “That’s it, that’s my girl. Fuck, you feel incredible. You feel me stretching your ass? Molding your walls for my cock?”

“I feel—” She is caught by a moan that takes over her entire body. “So full, so good.”

Once I’m fully inside of her ass, I’m not sure how I’ll be able to pull out because of how forcefully she’s clamped around me.

But slowly, I start to work my hips, moving my thumb a little faster as I do. I can’t help the grin that spreads across my face, the feeling of her loosening up around me enough for me to move faster.

“You’re such a pretty little whore, Sage. Taking me so good.”

Soon, I’m thrusting inside of her with more force, and I can see that look of tension building up on her face. My thighs slap against her skin, over and over again as I push myself deeper inside of her.

My own release is licking at my heels, twisting my gut, but I don’t care. I just want to watch her come.

I want to see how the euphoria erupts on her skin, exploding across her from head to toe. I wouldn’t care if I never came again if it meant I could see that face for the rest of my life.

Just that would be enough.

“Fuck, fuck,” she curses, digging her nails into my hips. “Rook!”

“So tight, so fucking good,” I grunt as my strokes become more erratic, out of control, feeling her spasms beneath me.

It’s not enough. I want more. I want it all.

I want her broken and thoroughly fucked. So weak that I have to carry her out of this stupid party where no one understands her.

Surrounded by all these people who put her in a cage because they were afraid of what she could do if they let her have free rein.

“Come again,” I growl, grabbing her legs at the ankles and pulling them apart so they fall to the table, leaving her open to me.

I sink my middle and ring finger inside her cunt, continuing to pound my length into her other hole.

“Too much,” she chokes out. “Shit, it’s too much.”

Working my fingers in and out, quickening my pace as I do, I make sure to rub that one spongy spot all the way inside of her.

“I said come,” I order, feeling my organs slice through me just as she goes into a silent scream, the pleasure overtaking her fully.

Her back arches off the table, trying to pull away from me, but I continue to pump my seed into her depths, still moving my fingers.

Clear fluid spurts onto my lower abdomen, her cunt washing over me as her second orgasm shatters her. I groan harshly as she tightens down.

The room is filled with ragged breaths as we both remain in this state of bliss, her body riding the aftershock of her climax.

I keep myself inside of her as I lean down, pressing soft kisses onto the mauled skin of her neck. Emotion mixes with the high of my lust as my tongue swirls around the marks I left, tasting the salty sweat on her skin.

Instead of asking like I did last time, I make it a statement that isn’t up for negotiation.

“I’m keeping you,” I say with a dry voice in desperate need of hydration.

Her fingers sink into my hair, tugging at the ends slightly, and I can feel her lips tilt into a smile.

“You’ve always had me, Rook. Always.”



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

the phoenix

sage

One more day.

We had a plan, and it's finally time to execute it.

This had been a long time coming, and the finality of it sticks to the air like rotting meat. It follows me around, nagging me.

I wanted it done today, but we had to wait for Alistair, who was spending the day with Briar at her uncle's for his birthday. Had to make sure there was a balance between revenge and love.

I'd learned over my time being around them that Alistair had a need for needing to be around when things went down. Not just because he had control issues or needed to be in charge, but because if things went badly, he wanted to be the one to take the fall. To be the one that got them out of trouble and away from any harm. That's who he is to them.

The older protector.

The protector.

Their constant shadow.

And I respect him for that, even if he still hasn't warmed up to me. Actually, none of them have really warmed up, especially Thatcher. He's made it very clear that he's not a fan of mine.

But that's okay because Rook has.

Rook is on fire for me, and I intend on being the oxygen to continue fueling those flames.

It had been a few days since the Spring Luncheon, and I don't think there had been a moment he'd spent outside of my body. And I was more than okay with that.

Even amongst all the turmoil and chaos that was happening around us, we had found our own little haven between the cracks, living and breathing

in the moments where it was just us.

I hadn't realized just how much I was missing before due to us not being able to be out in public together. Now I can openly gawk at him when he walks into a room or sit beside him in class if I want.

We are together.

And I've never felt more alive, even in a time when I was going through so much sorrow. I know I have him, and I no longer have to face the darkness alone, because he is the light that never goes out. And it's all mine.

It amazes me how we're all still living such normal lives, all the while such sinister plans are in the making. That despite the wickedness that is happening, we're able to make something beautiful from it.

"It'll only be a minute, I promise. I just need to change clothes," I tell Lyra, who walks behind me up the sidewalk to Silas's home.

Rook still wants me staying there, just until Frank meets his end.

"What's wrong with the outfit you're wearing? We're just going to Tilly's."

"I've been wearing this skirt all day, and I am desperate for a pair of leggings. It'll take two seconds tops."

What I found in Lyra's closet was something I knew I'd take to my grave. It was her secret to keep, her truth to burn. I knew it would come out eventually, but until that time came, I would keep her obsession close to my chest just like I'd promised.

Everything had been going so smoothly for the past few days that I should have expected something to go terribly wrong.

I should have seen it coming.

But there was nothing that could prepare me for what was waiting for us or just how drastically it would change the course of everything.

When the door opens, there were three things that happen.

One.

Silas's mother, Zoe, is sitting on the couch with Caleb and Levi flanking her sides, consoling her as large tears stream down her face.

Two.

Scott Hawthorne, a sophisticated, mild-tempered father, is pacing a hole through the floor. Whoever is on the opposite end of the phone call he's having is braving a storm I want no part of.

Three.

There's blood on the floor leading to the door. Not enough to warrant someone's death, but enough to make you worry.

"Sage!" Zoe gasps, standing up. "Have you heard from Si?"

"No, what's going on? Is he alright?" I ask, concern taking over.

Oh no.

No, no, no.

It is now I notice that Scott is sporting a white bandage on his hand, one that is allowing blood to leak through it.

"What happened?" I say, almost afraid to hear the answer.

"Silas is in the middle of a psychotic episode, one of the first since he was a young boy. He has given in to his psychosis and has started to believe that is his reality."

"But his medicine, I thought that was helping—"

"It was," Zoe sobs. "But he's stopped taking them. We had no idea until today when his father confronted him about his symptoms getting worse, and he admitted that he had switched the pills for a vitamin supplement. There was no way we could have known."

I turn to Lyra. My first instinct is to call Rook—he would know what to do, right?

Guilt swims in my gut.

This is partially my fault. I gave him too much time to come clean to Rook about what happened between us. But he'd been okay the past few days. He seemed alright, and now we are here.

All it took was a snap of a finger.

"I tried to stop him from leaving, but he was too far inside his head. I fought him, trying to keep him in the house long enough to call an ambulance, but he—" Scott raises his wounded hand, saying it with actions instead of words. "He just kept talking about how the voices were telling him what he needed to do so he could—" He chokes on the words, the sadness of a worried father taking over him. "So he could get Rose back."

There are so many things that could mean, and at the same time, we could have no idea, because whatever is happening inside Silas right now is between Silas and his demons, something that none of us is able to comprehend.

Schizophrenia is an unpredictable mental disease, one that takes no mercy on its victims, and Si is no exception.

My hands are shaking as I pull my phone from my pocket.

"We don't know where he's at, where he's headed, what he is capable of doing to himself." Scott runs a frustrated hand down his face.

"My baby boy," Zoe cries, the tears continuing to flow as she walks to her husband for a comfort that can only come from Silas being home safe.

"Scott, our baby."

He pulls her into his chest, holding her tightly to his body as if his arms could protect her from the pain outside of them.

"I'm going to call Rook," I say nervously. "Maybe he'll have a better idea of where he might be."

I click his name on my phone, still titled Lucifer.

"We already called him. He was the first person we contacted," Scott says just as I hear the dial tone end.

I can hear Rook's breathing on the other end.

I can feel his panic. His worry. His pain.

"We are going to bring him back," I tell them, not knowing what else I can say that will make this better.

"Don't tell them things you aren't sure of, TG," Rook says in my ear, making my chest throb.

Lyra and I leave the house and head towards the car.

"Rook, I have to tell you something," I mutter, "I should've said something earlier, I know, and this is my fault. I know this is my fault—"

I'm afraid to say what I need to.

Because I know when I do, he is going to hate me.

And I can't do that again. He can't hate me.

I just got him back.

One of the last things Rose talked to me about was her fear of Silas hating her, and I thought how crazy is that. That she's afraid of something so silly.

But I understand now.

"I'm so sorry, but Silas—"

"He told me."

Relief and confusion wash over me.

"About everything?" I croak.

"Everything. He even included the part about you giving him the ultimatum." He breathes out. "It's not your fault."

I slide into the passenger seat of Lyra's car, wanting nothing more than to be in front of him so he could see me saying this.

"And it's not your fault, Rook. You thought he was taking his medicine. There was no way you or anyone else would have known he switched them out."

I know where he is mentally. I know all he is doing is blaming himself for what he couldn't have seen coming. He is punishing himself, wanting to hurt himself for not seeing the signs or recognizing this sooner.

"It's not your fault," I mutter into the speaker, hoping he can understand that for himself.

"He's my best friend, Sage. I knew something was wrong, but I just didn't want to accept it. And now—"

There is a loud slamming in the background, like a fist against something hard, followed by Thatcher's voice muttering something about calming down.

"There is nothing we can do about it now, Rook. But you are right, he is your best friend. You know him better than anyone else. Where is he headed? Where would he go right now?"

It's a long shot because we don't know who Silas is when he's inside of his psychosis, but if anyone would know, it would be Rook. I would take the blunt end of whatever came from the pain Rook needs right now, but I need him to focus on finding Silas first.

Because yes, he is his best friend.

But he is also my sister's one and only love. She'd never forgive me if something happened to him, and I would never forgive myself.

"Rook," I say with a little more force. "Where would Silas go?"

There is a beat of silence.

"Frank. He's going to Frank."

rook

I knew he wasn't okay.

I knew it long before this moment.

I knew it long before he told me he tried to kiss Sage in the middle of a hallucination.

I knew he wasn't okay, and I didn't do anything because I watched him take his medication. I saw him take them, and I trusted them to do their job. To protect him from the voices that I couldn't shield him from.

But he was taking fucking vitamins for who knows how long. I couldn't figure out why he'd do something so reckless. Why he would risk falling into his illness even further on top of grieving Rose. I thought I'd done enough, read enough about it. I thought I was prepared for this possible outcome that came with schizophrenia.

I wasn't.

"Silas—"

"Shut the fuck up! Shut up," I hear my friend shout. "I know what you did. They know. We know. And I have to do something about it. If I do this, I'll get her back, do you understand? I can get her back."

His back is to me, but I can see Frank lying on the living room floor, blood dripping from his forehead. He raises his hands almost in a praying position.

"She's gone." His voice is shaking, "I'm sorry for what I did, but she's gone. Killing me won't do anything."

Wrong.

Killing him is going to feed the hellhound in our souls. Frank wears the omen of death like a thick cologne. His time is up. He'd corrupted and fooled enough people, and it's time for the bearers of death to serve their purpose.

But it won't be the end, will it?

It can't be.

We can't just turn this information over to the FBI or the police as we had originally planned. Not when we knew Cain was dirty—we have no idea how many of them were involved in the Halo. It would be a mistake to go to them.

However, that brought up the question of what do we do about the missing girls?

We could live our lives with blood soaking our hands, with the stench of death attached to our souls forever. It was a decision we'd all come to terms with, but could we knowingly look the other way while more girls were being taken and sold into sex slavery?

I can't speak for all of us, but I know my answer.

“No, no,” Silas mutters, the gun trembling in his hands. “I know, I know what he did. I know what I did. Yes, I know what I have to do, just—” He presses his hands into his head. “Be quiet. Be quiet.”

It’s like he’s having a conversation with multiple people and he can’t figure out who to reply to first. All of his words are rushing together, and everything he’s saying doesn’t make any sense. He’s trapped in a war inside of his own mind, and I have no clue how to help him in this battle.

There’s no sword. No shield. No weapon.

I have nothing.

“Silas,” I say calmly, stepping farther into the space, Thatcher close behind me. “It’s just me, man.”

I hate treating him like some wild animal because he isn’t. He’s just trapped and can’t see a way out.

He just needs help.

Abruptly, he spins around, staring at me, but it seems like he isn’t actually seeing me.

“Rook,” he expresses, “they wouldn’t let me wait. I couldn’t wait anymore. We were running out of time.”

I nod. “That’s alright. We don’t have to wait. You don’t have to wait.”

I walk closer to him, needing to get that gun out of his hand. I had stood in front of multiple targets while Silas shot objects around me. I would never doubt his aim, and I’m not going to deny him Frank’s death, but I’m afraid of what he’ll do after he’s done shooting him.

“Let us help you, okay? That’s why we’re here. We are here to help.” I try to keep my voice level, despite my nerves.

I keep walking until I’m right in front of him, only focusing on him.

I’ve never been inside of the Donahue house, only seeing it from the outside when we would drop Rosie off and when I’d sneak Sage out at night. You would think I would be used to normal places harboring ominous things.

“Don’t let him kill me, please. He has lost his mind—you can’t let him kill me. You have to help me,” Frank shouts from his place on the ground.

Silas shakes his head aggressively, looking to the right of me where there is no one, just a love seat.

“He is my friend. He wouldn’t do that,” he says, “He wouldn’t.”

“Hey, hey, Silas, look at me,” I tell him, trying to keep him here in reality, afraid to touch him because I’m not sure if that will help or harm him.

“What are they saying? Talk to me.”

“They—” He squeezes his eyes shut, cringing like he’s in pain. “They are telling me you’re going to stop me. That you don’t want me to get Rose back. They want me—” He reopens his eyes, looking at me and I swear all I see is him screaming for help. “They want me to kill you.”

I feel Thatcher shift behind my back, both of us facing away from the kitchen.

“If I could bring Rosie back, I swear to God I would, Silas. I would do anything,” I say, meaning every ounce of it. “But I can’t. There is nothing anyone can do to bring her back. The voices, it’s your mind playing tricks on you. They aren’t real, okay? It’s just inside of your head.”

I’m so angry that these things inside of his mind are taking him from me, and there’s nothing I can do. I can’t fight them. I can’t battle them for him, and I just feel useless. Not right now.

I promised I would look after him. I promised myself I wouldn’t let anything happen to him.

And look at what I let happen.

“You can’t do this. They won’t let you—”

My hands twitch a few times before I snap my head in Frank’s direction. “If you open your mouth again, I’ll burn your fucking eyes out, is that clear?” I bite out.

“Please, Rook. You’ve known me since you were a boy. Don’t do this. If you let me live, I’ll tell you everything I know. There are more people here in Ponderosa Springs involved. So many, you don’t have the slightest clue. I was just a victim to their organization. There are more powerful people in charge. You can throw them all in prison, me included, just don’t kill me.”

“Frank,” I seethe, staring down at him hard, “What isn’t clicking for you here? We don’t need you to figure any of that out. You are of no use to me alive, understand? The best thing you can do for me right now, is die.”

He shakes his head, fat tears streaming down his ballooned face,

“Please, I never wanted Rose to die, she was my little girl—”

“He said to be quiet!” Silas shouts, slinging the butt end of the gun into Frank’s head, causing a loud thud, followed by him crashing onto the floor. His eyes are closed, and his body is limp, but I can still see his chest moving to let me know he is still alive.

Doubt hits me like a wave, could we figure out who else was tied into Halo without an insider? I mean we had gotten this far.

We’d gone too far.

And if I had to guess we wouldn’t need to go looking for anyone else in involved.

They would be coming for us.

Very soon.

Silas continues to pace, muttering incoherently to himself and whoever else it is that he sees inside of this room right now. I walk a little closer, reaching my hand out tentatively.

“It’s over, Silas. It’s over, okay? Frank is gone, see.” I point towards the ground where the re-elected mayor of Ponderosa Springs lies rigidly still. I know he’s unconscious, but Si doesn’t need to.

“We did it. It’s all over, and now we can get you some help,” I say easily. “Just hand me the gun, and I promise you, it will all be okay. I just need you to trust me.”

He looks to be in physical pain, his body trembling and head shaking, and there’s nothing I can do to soothe him from the anguish he is feeling right now.

“No, no, this isn’t right. She was supposed to come back.” He rubs his hand down his face, looking back to the right of me instead of looking at me. “What do you mean?” he says, eyebrows furrowed. “You promise? Yeah, if you promise, I’ll do it.”

My entire world seems to come to a staggering halt as Silas pulls his eyes back to me, and all I see is an emptiness inside. Nothing but a harsh void staring back at me as he raises the barrel of the gun to his head.

I feel my mouth go dry, and my gut twists and churns.

Round, heavy tears leak from the edges of his eyes.

“Don’t do this to me, Silas,” I demand, stepping into his space. “Let me help you.”

Tears fall to the floor as he shakes his head, taking his bottom lip between his teeth. “You can’t help me. The only way you can help me is if I

kill myself. You have to understand I have to do this.”

“No,” I choke out, grabbing for his shoulder, “You are not leaving me. I won’t let you. You have to know this isn’t you, that those aren’t real. This is real, Silas. We are real.”

Something inside of him breaks, because as soon as his hand twitches, I remove the gun from his fingers, pulling it into my own grip.

His head drops onto my shoulder, his body nearly falling limp in my arms.

“I’m so tired, Rook,” he whispers.

“I know,” I say, rubbing his back.

Tired of the voices.

Tired of his sickness.

Tired of it all.

At some point, I have to ask myself if we were doing more harm than good to him while hunting down what happened to Rose. We knew that revenge wasn’t going to bring her back, it wouldn’t make any of us miss her any less, and all it seems to be doing right now is breaking Silas even more.

“Son, I’m going to need you to put that gun down, and I need everyone to put their hands in the air.”

You have got to be fucking shitting me.

With the gun still in my possession, I lift it up as I spin around, meeting eyes with Detective Finn Breck holding his own weapon to the side of Thatcher’s head, his arm wrapped around his neck, yanking him into his chest to keep him still.

Thatcher is still slightly taller, making this situation look quite comical if his life wasn’t in danger.

“Why are people always pointing guns at me?” Thatcher sighs, rolling his eyes as if it’s only a minor inconvenience and not a matter of life and death.

They stand in front of the open kitchen, Finn having come from the back door, I’m assuming. Most likely because Frank called him before Silas had subdued him.

I keep the gun pointed at Finn, fully aware that if he makes a move, I’d be more likely to punch.

“You either put it down and come willingly, or I’m going to shoot your friend here. Even stevens for my partner,” he says, eyes flaring

maliciously.

I don't bother to deny it, because only one of us is gonna make it out of this, and I'm not gonna go out a pussy.

"Here I was thinking you were one of the good ones the entire time. Is it something in the water here that makes everyone turn into backstabbing pieces of shit? Or are you all just born into sex slavery and pedophilia?" I ask, tilting my head in question.

I want to be surprised that he was in on this with his more-than-dead partner. The one that had been turned into soup. Sulfuric acid is a miracle worker for a man trying to get rid of a body.

But I'm not shocked. Everyone has their foot in something immoral. This town is drowning in it.

"Don't look down on me for shit you can't comprehend, boy."

The back door cracks open quietly, and I can see it out of the corner of my eye. I'd never been the damsel in distress, and I had never needed rescuing, but I'm not opposed to a little help at this moment.

"You're right. I can't comprehend how a man with a family would throw of it away for what, some quick dirty cash? Who seems like the boy now?"

"It's much more than that. You haven't even touched the surface of how far the Halo runs or who it has its claws dug inside of. Even if you could find a way out of this, they won't stop till you are all dead. They know you. They know your names. Your families, your life. I'm doing you a favor here," He laughs, "Ending it here and now, before people much scarier than me come hunting you down."

"This isn't going to end the way you think it will," I tell him, holding my arm around Silas to prevent him from moving anywhere.

"Yeah? Who seems in more control here?" He scoffs, choking Thatch a little tighter, causing my friend to slit his eyes threateningly, tired of having someone he doesn't know touch him. "The fed whose partner was killed by a group of college kids on a rampage? Or the decorated officer trying to protect the town mayor?"

Bad things happen when angry people are left to grieve. Even worse things accrue when good people are forced to protect the ones they care for.

"My money is on the girl with the knife."

Lyra sends the silver edge of the blade into the side of Finn's neck, sinking into the vein like she's slicing through a ripened fruit. The blood loss is immediate. It spurts from the open wound when she yanks it from the hole.

Scarlet liquid that reeks of metal cascades across Thatcher's shoulder, pouring down the front of his shirt like a rushing waterfall. There is a wild look in his eye, one I've never seen before as he watches it drip down him, slipping down the collar of his shirt.

Lyra's hand is steady as she drops the knife to the floor. There is no fear or panic on her face; she looks like she always does—passive and unbothered by what's going on in the world. Blood coats her tiny pale hand, and instead of looking to the man she'd just killed as he falls to the ground, she simply steps back, letting his body slug to the floor, and stays fixated on Thatcher. Her gaze never moves from him, not even for a second.

"This was a new shirt," he breathes, his chest heaving as he turns around to look at her, a dead body the only thing between them.

"It was ugly. The blood made it look better," she says, lifting her sunken eyes up to him. With her bloody hand and the purple bags beneath her eyes from the lack of sleep, she reminds me of a Tim Burton character—frizzy hair, eyes too big for her face, pasty skin.

"Is he dead?" I hear come from the kitchen, and it only takes her voice for me to turn all my attention in her direction.

I never believed in Heaven or Hell.

Fate or destiny.

I never stood outside and wished on falling stars.

No, I never believed in anything like that, but I do believe in her.

"Is my dad dead?" she breathes, her eyes dancing with innocent little demons, and I'd never seen chaos in such a beautiful state.

Such a striking shade of blue, tangled with the fire I love to play with.
Is it fate? Is it destiny?

That as a boy, even before the death of my mother, I would sit for hours staring into open flames, refusing to pull my eyes away from it. Too consumed, too enthralled with the way the smoke sang in swirls and the embers stung my skin.

And those same flames dance in the corners of her eyes. So hot, so fucking blue, and I want to roast alive inside of them.

Maybe I'd always seen her inside the fire.

Or maybe I'd just been born in the blaze.

"Not yet," Thatcher says. "We need to get this cleaned up, Rook,"

"Get Silas, go with Lyra, and get the fuck out of here. When the police show up, I can't have you covered in blood," I say, moving towards Sage.

"What are you going to do?"

"Whatever needs to be done. I just need you out of here before that happens."

I reach her, my hands caging her face between them, pulling her lips to my own. I drown myself in her touch for a solitary moment between the mayhem. My piece of heaven inside my very own hell.

"Do you trust me?" I whisper against her mouth.

She nods, wrapping her fingers around my wrist. "Always."

I lead her farther into the kitchen, searching around for the materials I need. I toss a copper pan onto the stove, opening her fridge and grabbing some random piece of frozen meat before grabbing the vegetable oil.

We don't have time to get rid of two bodies. We don't have the time to clean up our evidence from being inside this place. There are too many variables involved, and we need to get rid of this mess now.

"What are we going to do?" she asks, watching me as I turn on all the burners on high, placing the pan onto one of the open ones along with the meat.

I drain the entire bottle of oil across the stovetop, the pan, along the kitchen counter. Our best bet out of this is making this fire look like an accident, like the people who died inside weren't murdered; they'd simply gotten trapped by the flames.

This was it.

The moment we'd all waited so long for.

Rome hadn't been built in a day, that's what Alistair kept telling me when I'd get impatient.

But it burned down in one.

"Burn it. All of it. To the fucking ground. And it's not we," I say, looking at her, knowing if something were to go wrong right now, I'd do anything to protect her from it.

She had never been the innocent Eve in the garden.

She had always been my Lilith. My equal. My queen. A phoenix.

I reach into my front pocket, pulling my matches out.

“This is your revenge. Your embers to make and your ashes to rise from. You never needed anything but the match.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

pain & pleasure

sage

I sit against the wall of the Pierson's many spare bedrooms. Naively, I thought the inside of this place would look more like a morgue than a home. I fully expected to find a coffin inside of Thatcher's bedroom. It made sense that he would sleep inside one. It would match the creature people loved comparing him to.

I'd been wrong.

The extravagant house that he called home was everything you would expect from someone with money like his. The first time I'd been here a few weeks ago, I was too distracted to pay attention to how much money the Piersons had.

While we were all well-off, Thatcher was bathing in wealth. His great grandfather's hard work of pioneering a real estate company had secured his family's lives well beyond his years. Even if Thatcher, his kids, and their grandchildren never worked another day in their lives, they would never want for anything.

The extremely tall ceilings and Gatsby inspired architecture made my family's house look like a servants' quarters. Much like Alistair, Thatcher lived on an estate.

We were staying along the west wing, where we were told most guests stayed. And it felt weird to be staying in such a casually expensive home after what we had just done.

Shutting my eyes, I rest my head against the wall, seeing nothing but smoke and a swirl of orange flames. I had stood frozen on the front lawn of my house, the flashing sirens simply a dull whine in the back of my mind.

My hand was curled through the slits of Rook's fingers, both of us standing there hand in hand as the blue flashing lights reflected off our faces.

My neighbors had come outside to examine the chaos. This would be the talk of the town for a good three months.

Tears were streaming down my face, not because of what I had lost inside, because while that fire was burning, it felt like it was over. For the first time since Rosie's death, there was this peace that had settled over me, even though everyone around us saw the complete opposite.

My father, Detective Breck, all the painful memories that house had brought me over the course of a lifetime were now turning into nothing but ash and dust. Soot that firemen would wash off their boots in the morning.

Now, sitting here, I still can't find it in me to regret what I had done.

I know that killing someone is supposed to be this mark on your soul that stays with you forever, something that eats away at the humanity inside you until you finally break and tell the world what you've done.

But it doesn't feel like that.

And maybe that makes me some kind of psychopath or something, but all I feel is relief that he's gone. That the man who was responsible for the sharpest pain I'd ever felt was no longer breathing, nothing but a pile of charred bones and seared skin. His body was destroyed, and I hoped his soul was headed to some form of internal torture. Where he would spend his years suffering for what he did to his own flesh and blood.

Rook referenced Dante's Inferno when I asked him if he thought my father was in Hell. He said that those who choose the sin of greed are assigned to the fourth circle of Hell. Those who hoard too much money or choose wealth over anything else. But he believed that was too easy for him.

He said he'd be in the very last Ring, the ninth circle, those who betray their own kin. Where inside my father will spend eternity lodged inside of the frozen lake of ice headfirst. Contrary to most religious teachings, Dante said that the pit of hell was cold and without love.

Rook had told me this as we waited for the police and firefighters to arrive, and I distinctly remember smiling, recalling the times that my father would turn the thermostat up in our home because he couldn't stand to be cold.

"Why are you on the floor?"

I open my eyes, seeing Rook wearing nothing but a white towel around his waist. His hair is wet and falling down his forehead, drips of water falling down onto his chest.

My body was tired, mentally exhausted from everything we'd just endured the past few hours. From the fire to the police, to the hospital afterward. But somehow, my legs find the strength to stand up and move towards him.

His skin is blistering red. He'd allowed himself to stand underneath the stream of searing hot water until it turned cold I'm sure. My fingers reach out to run across the top of his shoulder blade, sadness in my eyes.

"Rook—" I mutter,

"Don't Sage." He interrupts me, tightening his jaw. "I'm holding onto my promise by a thread here."

"What happened to Silas tonight was not your fault," I tell him anyway, even though he doesn't want to hear it.

Angry at my words, he moves past me, walking towards our bed for the night, and falls to the edge of the mattress. With a sigh, he drops his head between his shoulders, looking at the ground.

I know he isn't angry with me. Not really. He's angry at himself because he felt like if anyone could have stopped this, it would have been him.

"Then whose fault was it? Hmm?" He grunts, emotion choking his throat. Rook had been so strong at the hospital. Stood his ground even when Silas's mother, Zoe, broke down into a mess of tears in his arms.

He held her tightly, his spine stiff and jaw taunt at the hospital waiting room. For the first time since I'd met him, he'd been able to remove all the emotion from himself. The emotion that drives him was gone.

I knew he'd have to break down, eventually. He could only be strong for so long. And when he watched his best friend get wheeled into an ambulance for transportation to a facility, I could see the crack in his eyes.

This had broken him.

"I knew he wasn't okay." He presses his fingers into his chest. "I fucking knew it and I did nothing. That's my best friend, Sage and I almost let him kill himself."

His fingers turn into hard fists, he slams them into his chest repeatedly. Chasing the relief that comes from hurting himself.

I kneel between his legs, grabbing his wrists, hating to see him like this.

My fire god.

The one that burns so bright and so fierce, was dwindling out by the second.

“Rook, look at me,” I whisper, “Look at me,” I say again until he finally lifts his watery eyes to my own.

There is no hellfire inside them right now. Only a brilliant shade of hazel. There is no devil, no Lucifer. Only a man with a broken soul who does not know how to fix it.

“Schizophrenia.” I say, “That’s whose fault this is. Not yours, not mine, not anyone. Silas is sick and he just needs some help. There was nothing you could have done to prevent him from stopping his medicine.”

I’m trying to rationalize with him. To make him see that this was the sickness that lived inside of Silas. One that he had gotten too tired to fight against. But I should have known that would be impossible, not when the wound was this fresh.

All I could do now was hold pressure and hope he didn’t bleed out before I could stitch him up.

“I need to hurt, TG.” He chokes. “I need the pain. Fuck, I need it so bad right now. Someone needs to make me pay for this. Go get Thatcher. Call Alistair. Anything. Please, baby, I need to make it hurt.”

I felt like I’d been wrapped in barbed wire, which was slowly tightening around me the more he spoke. There was no way out of it without slicing myself to pieces. I couldn’t let him hurt himself. I couldn’t let him walk out of this room into Thatcher’s basement and let him cut.

I was stuck between letting someone else hurt him, letting him hurt himself, or taking this into my own hands. But the thought of causing him physical or mental anguish made my gut churn.

Bringing my hands down, I rest them on his thighs, licking my dry lips as I bring my forehead to his, our noses touching each other. The scent of his after-shave—the mix of smoke and mint fills my head. My eyes roamed his face, tracing the remaining water droplets that were missed by the towel.

He turns towards me, the proximity between our bodies reduced to mere inches, and suddenly the air is scorching. As if inhaling would only flood your lungs with smoke—a heat that would burn you from the inside out.

My hands inch upward, slipping beneath the towel. My fingers dip towards his crotch, and I hear him suck a breath in through his teeth.

“What are you doing?” He groans, and the sound makes a spark sizzle inside my stomach.

“The only thing I know I can do for you right now,” I mutter, “Trust me.”

Those words make me nervous. Asking him to do that, knowing all we’d been through.

I wrap my fingers around his semi-erect cock. The heat of his body heat from the shower warms my hand. My heart jumps to my throat as I feel him harden in my grasp.

“This is the opposite of what I need right now.” He inhales sharply as my thumb swipes across the tip. “Shit.” He hisses in pleasure.

I couldn’t hurt him. Not the way he wanted me to, but I knew he needed something to take the edge off, something to ground him. I just want to be what he needs right now. Maybe it’s my way of making it up to him for all the times I wasn’t there before.

Quickly I flip the towel up, exposing his shaft to the air, readjusting on my knees so I’m more comfortable between his legs. I guide the throbbing member to my lips, only letting my tongue swirl around the silver balls that pierce the top. I trace their pattern, repeatedly, until I know he’s miserable from the teasing.

My toes curl when he buries his hands in the back of my hair, both of them grabbing a chuck of my short locks. I can feel the passion in his grip. It radiates from my skull all the way to my toes.

“Sage...” He says to me in a tone of caution, I can feel him try to press my head lower, I can feel just how badly he is craving my entire throat. Wanting to fill it up and stretch it out until I’m choking.

But that isn’t happening tonight, even though I desperately want it to.

I pull back slightly, removing my tongue. My grip on his cock tightens. I test the waters with just how much he can take before he groans in a twisted mix of discomfort and pleasure.

“You get only what I give you, understand?” I tell him, looking up so he can see my eyes. There is a vortex churning behind those eyes, spinning so fast and so hot, it would swallow me whole if I let it. I knew if we were

going to do this, it would be by my rules. I'd be taking his control for the time being.

As much as I loved kneeling at his feet, relinquishing my control for the sake of pleasure, there was something powerful in being in command.

“What—”

I twist my wrist, squeezing roughly, “You want to hurt? Then we do it on my terms.”

He doesn't have a chance to reply because I take the tip of his cock into my mouth, playing with the balls of his piercing. Teasing for another aching moment, before I drop lower on his shaft, taking more of him into my mouth.

I feel the bulging veins tickling my throat as my hands and tongue work in unison. Working up a quick pace that has the room spinning. The sounds of his moans send waves of need throughout my body.

My jaw expands as I take him fully into my throat, my nose pressed against his pubic bone as I struggle to breathe. Fighting the urge to cough, but enjoying the feeling. Pushing myself to make sure I give him what he wants. What he needs.

There is a hunger in the pit of my stomach. A drive to prove a point. To make him understand. I continue to work up and down, speeding up just as my free hand cups his heavy balls, rolling them around my fingers before squeezing.

“Shit,” He curses, “Sage, I'm gonna—”

I knew this would be the hard part. Because as I look up, he looks so goddamn beautiful as he chases his release, the way his head falls back and the veins in his neck bulge from the skin. His taut jaw made my entire soul hum with excitement. I was constantly in awe of just how pretty Rook Van Doren was.

It physically hurts me to do what I need to, but I do it anyway. I suck the tip just a little too hard before I remove my touch altogether. Pulling myself away from his cock with a loud pop.

Spit drips in a thin line from his shaft and my mouth, my tongue rolling across my bottom lip, feeling how swollen it is.

“What the—” He looks down at me with furrowed eyebrows, frustrated by his lost orgasm.

The tip of my finger tugs deliberately at the piercings. Knowing it must feel at least uncomfortable, but with his pain tolerance, it probably barely bothers him.

“This was not your fault. None of this was your fault. There isn’t anything more you could have done, Rook.” I tell him, “Do you hear me?”

“Goddammit, Sage, this is not the conversation I want when my cock is in your hands.” He tries to thrust up towards me, his hips jerking, still needing release.

The air is suddenly scorching. As if inhaling would only flood my lungs with smoke—a heat that would burn me from the inside out. My breath caught, trapped inside my lungs.

I pull at the metal I little harder, “Tell me you understand. Tell me you know it wasn’t your fault and I’ll let you come.”

A surge of power washes over my bones. I would make him see the truth, the truth that had always been right in front of him. That he was punishing himself for things that were not his fault as a way of dealing with the hurt they caused.

Instead of blaming the world like the rest of us, Rook always chose himself.

“Fuck,” he says, head falling down, so he is looking at me.

His chest expands and falls repeatedly. I can see the deep-rooted fragility I had always known he had. The one he so badly tries to stifle and starve out until it dies. Right now, he is a brittle piece of glass. If I were to squeeze him too tight, he might shatter in my grip, splintering me with the jagged edges.

And the thing is, I would let him.

I would slice my fingers open until my palms were raw, just to pick up the broken shards. Just so I could help him put it all back together. I would do anything for him, even if it meant hurting myself.

He was my fire god.

And I live to burn for him.

“Do you want to come, Rook?” I raise an eyebrow, leaning dangerously close to the tip of his dick.

I can feel him jerk. “Yes, baby, please. I need—” He is taken by a groan that vibrates his entire frame. “Please let me come.”

“I will,” I mutter, “I want to make you come, babe. Just tell me the truth. Tell me you know.”

My whole life, I’d had this crushing weight of loneliness bearing down on my soul. Enduring years of solitude, even though I was surrounded by people. The burden of being alone, having only myself to rely on, held me below water for so long.

I almost forgot what it was like to breathe.

That was the power loneliness had on a person. It makes you so desperate for human contact, for a soul to cling to.

And here, with him, I know what it feels like to breathe. For the first time, I know what it feels like to be wanted. All I want to do is inhale him. To breathe nothing but him into my lungs until that is all that remains.

“It—” He grinds his teeth, “I know it’s not my fault. I know that none of it was my fault.”

“Good, good boy.” I purr, smirking a bit at the words I used, returning my mouth to his shaft.

I pump my hand up and down as I focus my suction on the tip, rolling my tongue around. His grip on the back of my head tightens and I feel his hips lift into my mouth, forcing himself down my throat.

We find our rhythm again and it’s not long before he’s groaning my name loudly, while I swallow all he will give. The slightly salty taste washes down my throat, doing nothing to sedate my hunger for him.

I pull away, panting as I wipe the saliva from my mouth with the back of my hand, falling back onto the back of my legs. Watching him fall down from his moment of climax.

Heat strikes my core when he makes eye contact with me, the left side of his mouth tipping up slightly.

“My turn, but like you said,” he says, “You’re going to need to trust me.”

He stands to his full height; the towel falling to the floor, and I look up at him, admiring the curves and dips of his body. When he reaches down for me, I let him help me up from the floor. Only for Rook to spin me around and press me onto the bed, my ass hanging off the edge.

I can feel his fingers trailing down my spine through the material of my shirt. My face chasing the cool material of the comforter, needing a relief from the heat that is coursing through my veins.

“Take your pants off. I need to grab something, but leave the panties. I want to take those off myself.” He mutters, leaving a kiss on the back of my head before he walks to the bathroom.

“You starting a collection of my underwear, Van Doren?” I ask, referring to my pair of missing panties from the theatre, as I wiggle out of my pants, kicking them across the room when they are off my legs.
“Maybe.”

I liked the idea of him being just as obsessed with me as I was with him. I wanted us to eat, sleep, and breathe each other. The couple that became inherently annoying with how crazy we were about one another.

I wanted to be embarrassingly in love with him for the rest of my life.

When he comes back, I’m in the same position he left me in. Dangling off the edge of the bed, my ass up in the air towards him.

His hand splays across my hip bone, pulling me closer to his body. His fingers toy with the material of my panties before he pulls them off.

“Do you trust me, Sage?” He questions, the bass of his voice thrums a chord deep inside of me.

“Always,” I mutter, needing him in every way you could need a person.

“Good,” His hand skims the inner portion of my thigh, making me spread my legs wider for him, “Because what I’m gonna do won’t feel good. But afterward, everyone will know your mine. Ponderosa Springs, fate, there will be no question of who you belong to, TG.”

My mind races, trying to figure out what this means for me, but suddenly everything goes blank. Because pleasure licks my brain clean as his fingers dip between my legs.

He spreads my lips with the digits, just as his fingertips circle my clit carefully, deliberate yet soft. I moan, rolling my hips against his touch, urging him to give me more. I am so needy. I wanted him so badly I could cry. Needing to be filled until there was nothing but Rook.

I let him play with me, tease me, spreading my juices around until I’m a sloppy mess. My entire core is on the edge, needing just that little push so that I can fall into a pool of electric euphoria.

“Rook, please,” I beg, my voice cracking.

“I know baby, I know.”

It's then that he inserts two fingers inside of me, my walls instantly clenching around him. The intrusion welcomed as I rock my hips against him, impetuous and desperate.

My nails tear into the bedsheet beneath me—my breath trapped in my lungs. There is no feeling like this. No feeling like him.

My body trembles as he works in and out of me, hitting that spot only he can. Mind, body, soul, all of it was sent into overdrive.

“You’re squeezing me so tight, wish I could feel this on my cock, baby.” He growls, “You are gonna come soon, aren’t you? Yeah, I can feel you getting wetter, your hips rocking faster, you’re so close.”

I moan, long and broken, “Yes, Rook. Fuck yes.”

My heart might give out at the rush of this.

I’m so close, right there, when he removes his fingers. I think it’s his way of repaying what I did to him earlier, but instead I feel his lips at the shell of my ear.

“Remember, it’ll only hurt for a few moments, then you’re mine forever.” He growls.

That’s when I feel it.

An intense sudden flash of heat sears the skin at the back of my hip. I let out a guttural scream, burying my face into the mattress as he holds the heat to my body before removing it when he’s finished.

The cold air makes the burn intensify. He was marking me with something, but I felt it all the way inside my soul.

Just when the pain was becoming too much, his fingers returned to my core. Sinking deep inside my channel, where they continued at the same pace as earlier. His finger bullying my G-spot repeatedly until I’m back on the edge.

Like fucking magic, he coaxes my orgasm out of my body.

“Come all of my fingers, baby. Be my good girl, be good for me.” He whispers, pumping inside of me harder until my legs shake.

Everything feels so intense.

The sting directly contrasts the waves of blissful pleasure that vibrate my body. I can’t focus on one or the other because of how well they blend together. That’s what Rook and I have always been.

The constant mixture of pain and pleasure. We could never have one without the other because without the hurt we would never understand just

how good the bliss felt.

“That’s it, sweetness, that’s it. Ride it out.” His voice tickles me as he buries his face into the side of my neck peppering warm kisses against my skin.

The aftershock of my climax makes me shake and I can feel the sharp ache from whatever he did. My body and soul were so exhausted that it wouldn’t even matter.

I feel him leave my body for a quick moment, only to return seconds later. I feel the cold washcloth pressed against my skin, making me hiss.

“Fuck, that hurts,” I mutter, turning to look at him over my shoulder with half-lidded eyes, “What did you do to me?”

He looks down at his work, something like pride swimming inside of his eyes. Then he picks up the piece from a broken Zippo. It’s just the brass lid of the lighter and I can see his initials that are engraved on it.

“Most people would call it a brand,” He mutters, “But it’s more than that.”

Something claws at my chest and lights my heart ablaze. The love I have for him eats me alive from the inside out.

“It’s us.”

Our eyes meet and even though I’m moments from passing out from exhaustion, I don’t miss how the fire in his eyes catches, the steady flame inside of them burning once again.

Relit and ready to burn for eternity.

“Yeah, baby. It’s us.”



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

hate but make it holy

rook

Rook,

If you're reading this, Frank is dead, and I have followed suit.

I'm only one sentence into this, and it's already sappy. I didn't even want to leave a note. I figured my suicide would be pretty straightforward.

I'm miserable without her, and knowing that her killer is in the ground has soothed something in me, but it doesn't feel like enough.

I didn't leave a note for anyone but you, and I need to tell you why.

First, you're the only one my parents actually like. They'd never say it out loud 'cause they love and support my choice in friendships. My dad still hasn't forgiven Alistair for punching a hole in the drywall, and Thatcher gives my mother the 'heebie-jeebies' (her words, not mine)

But they like you, and I know that when I'm gone, you'll be there for them. I'd like you to remind them that they did everything right.

They gave me love. A home. A life.

They did everything they could to help me with my schizophrenia, and I'm thankful for that. Tell them I love them, and this decision wasn't made selfishly.

I genuinely believe they will flourish with me gone. After they mourn and they begin to let me go, they will feel the weight of my mental illness be lifted. No more doctors, no more scheduled medications or constant worry. They will be free.

Just like I am.

You don't have to, but I know you will keep an eye on Levi and Caleb. Just make sure they don't get into too much shit, and if they do, teach them how to not get caught next time.

Thatcher and Alistair didn't get a letter because they knew this would happen, and I think they already prepared for it.

You tried everything to deny it to yourself. To prevent it.

They didn't get a letter because while they will grieve and hurt for my loss, they won't blame themselves.

Not like you will.

So this is why it had to be you, because I want, need you to know this was not your fault.

It wasn't your fault I had schizophrenia, it wasn't your fault Rose died, and I know you'll fight it, but there was nothing you could've done to prevent this.

You did everything you could, and while it was more than enough, it was still never going to be enough.

Do not punish yourself for my death. You were one of the only things that made my life worth living, and if you fuck my memory up with your guilt, I will kick your ass.

Know that I'm at peace. That I'm happy. I'm free, Rook, and I'm with her.

And one day, when you're well into your nineties, I'll be with you again too.

Don't lose yourself trying to search for the why, especially not after I wrote this entire gaudy thing.

Never lose your fire.

I'll meet you at the Styx.

- Silas

I reread the letter one more time, grateful that I'll never have to follow up on anything inside of it.

Flicking my Zippo, I take the orange flame to the paper, watching it grab at the thin material and start to eat the edges away.

It burns quick, even faster when I drop it into the trash can next to my bed.

One week.

That's how long Silas has been gone. Still alive, but still gone.

I'd refused to let his family send him to Monarch's facility after what Sage had told me about that place, and they had eagerly agreed to send him

somewhere near Portland. Not to get him away from the humiliation of Ponderosa Springs, but to ensure he got the correct care he deserved.

We weren't sure how long it would take for Silas to come back from his psychosis or how long he'd need to be hospitalized. It could be a few weeks, it could a few months, it could be a year. All we knew was we were prepared to stand by him until he got the help he needed.

The doctors were hopeful that with cognitive therapy and a new set of medications, he would be back to his old self in no time, but there was always a chance that he could lose himself to the hallucinations and delusions that plague his mind.

I try not to think of that too much.

When the fire goes out and there is nothing left of the letter but rubble and ashes, I grab my jacket off my bed and head down the steps.

My father is sitting at the table, with a few papers strewn out in front of him and a whiskey glass to his left.

The sound of my feet brings his attention to my presence.

"Where are you going?" he asks, the gravel in his voice telling me he is in the mood to take out his grief.

"Out," I grunt.

"If I ask you a question, Rook, I expect a real answer. Not a smartass one." He pushes the chair out from his place on the table, meeting me in the middle of my walk towards the door.

"I'm going to Frank's funeral, paying my respects, mourning the dead, doing my Christian duty."

"Don't disrespect God in this house, son. Not when I know what you did, what you continue to do."

"I'm not going to sit here and listen to your self-righteous bullshit," I mutter, sidestepping his frame so I can leave without a fight, but it seems that's what he's in the mood for today.

"You will stand here for as long as I want you to." He grabs at the front of my shirt, yanking me close to him so I can smell the liquor on his breath.

I could let him hit me. I could let him hurt me for not doing something sooner about Silas. I could stand here and let him take out his pain on my body and continue being the scapegoat for our mother's death.

For a minute, I want to. The craving to feel the sharp sting of pain still lives just beneath the surface of my skin, waiting to be exposed.

But I don't. Because she's waiting on me, and I gave her my word. I fight that urge because I want to be the person she needs. The person that she runs to when the world hurts her, not the other way around.

"I'm done letting you punish me for something that was an accident." I wrap my hands around his wrist, squeezing painfully as I rip them from the material of my shirt. "You don't get to play God just because you miss Mom."

The look on his face could only be described as one of utter shock coupled with fear. He knows I'd kill him in a fight; he knows what he has been doing to me all these years, what I've been letting him do with no consequences.

"An accident? If you would have just behaved, just that once, she would still be here!" he sneers. "Even as a child, you couldn't follow the rules, and so help me, you will learn discipline in this house."

He raises his hand to slap me.

"You better be ready for what happens after you land that. I know I can handle a punch from you—are you sure you could handle me hitting you back?" I warn. "Or I'll give my friends the permission they've been waiting for."

"You wouldn't," he breathes.

"Oh, I would," I smirk. "And you should know, they aren't fond of fathers who treat their children like shit. So before you hit me again, ask yourself, are you ready to answer for your sins, Dad?"

This time when I move past him, he lets me go, standing in his own fear of punishment.

I'd thought about what would happen if he changed, if I could bring myself to forgive him for all the abuse over the years. I think it would take time, but I would because I'd allowed him to do it for too long. I'd almost given him permission to do it. I'd enabled him.

But tigers don't change their stripes, not overnight, and that would be a bridge I would cross if it was ever built.

When the door closes behind me, I leave everything there.

Because there is something much more important that requires my attention.

Sage leans against the hood of her car, arms crossed in front of her and a pair of black sunglasses sitting on her nose. A skirt number is wrapped around her waist, showing off her pretty legs that I love to feel squeeze me when I'm buried inside of her.

My mouth waters at the sight of her lips painted bright red.
A poison apple.

I have this rash urge to eat it off. Leave it smeared all over her chin from my kiss, from all the filthy things I'd love to do to that venom-coated mouth.

So that's what I do because I already have low impulse control, and around her, it seems absolute.

I press my lips to hers, not worried about the stain it will leave on my own skin. I drink her down like air, feeling her come alive beneath my touch. My hellfire and holy water. Sometimes she's sweet, and sometimes she could burn the world down.

And I love waking up not knowing which one I'd get.

My hands fall beneath her skirt, massaging with my thumbs before I skate upwards, my fingers grazing the raised skin just above her left ass cheek. Pride fills me.

"How's this healing?" I mutter, pulling away enough to let her answer.

My toes curl knowing she's been marked by me in more ways than just physically.

My initials branded right across the top of her ass, just like I'd told her I would do. She wears the delicate, gothic font like a sparkling jewel, and every time I see it, my gut fills with emotion.

"Fine. Still a little sore, but I kinda like it." She bites at my bottom lip, pulling it out playfully.

"Yeah? You like a little pain, don't you, TG?" I smirk, looking down my nose at her, pulling one of my hands up to shove the glasses up to rest on the top of her head so I can see her eyes.

"Only when I know you'll lick it better."

I'd always thought that falling for Sage was the worst mistake of my life. That she would make me weak. That she would snuff the flame that had always burned so hot inside of me.

But she is oxygen, constantly fueling me, for better or for worse. She built me higher, made me burn hotter, gave me strength.

I'd been through hell—we had gone through hell—but I was appreciative of that. Because I'd never been able to recognize her grace, had never known what sin was.

You never really know how damaged you are until you try to love someone.

Her eyes shine a bright blue, and it makes me tilt my head,

“What are you thinking about?” I ask, practically seeing the wheels spinning.

“Your eyes,” she mutters. “It was the first thing I noticed when I came back here. They looked so empty, but now they are different. Less vacant.”

“That’s the thing, baby.” I tuck a piece of hair behind her ear. “When we ended, you reminded me how empty I am. How so goddamn empty I have always been. The only thing that fills me is you, and it shows.”

It’s true.

Every bit of it.

“How did that go?” she asks, wrapping her arms around my waist.

“I’m not bleeding, so it’s a start,” I laugh. “I’m not worried about me though. Are you ready for this?”

With soft fingers, she reaches up to fiddle with my hair. “I’m pissed he is going to be buried beside my sister, but I think I’m ready for anything with you by my side.”

A grin spreads across her cheeks as she leans closer to me, her lips brushing my own.

“My fire god.”

“Fire god, huh?”

“Yup,” she hums, smiling at me behind her long lashes. “Always ready to burn. So bright. If anything happens, I know you’ll be there to hand me the match.”

The gold necklace she wears glitters in the sun.

“I’ll always be there. Always. No matter what happens, you will always have me.”

“Because you decided to keep me?” she whispers.

There are mountains ahead of us, things that are out of our control, and even though we’d taken care of everything on our end, there are people

out there who know about us. Who know that we are after them.

It won't be long before they send more obstacles to stop us. To try and rip us apart. We are no longer the hunters; we would soon become the hunted. But we're all ready for whatever is coming.

Even if they didn't come for us, we would make sure those missing girls' families got answers. That no matter how nasty, we would make sure the right people found out about what was happening here and they could stop it. Even if that meant ending ourselves in the process.

It was a small victory. Ending the life of the person who'd thrown Rose into this mess, but it wasn't the end. Not with everything we knew now. There were too many lives on the line and even though I'd never considered myself a hero, I was a decent human being, despite my reputation.

Whatever hell they brought, we would always bring more. There is no one who could out-chaos us. Not when we had been born from it, not when we lived in it.

I would do anything to protect my family. No matter how fucked and dysfunctional, they are mine. And there's nothing I wouldn't do for them.

And fuck do I know that Sage and I came together in a hurricane of rash decisions and lustful disarray, but what we have found beneath all that pain, all the lies, all the truths, was something real.

It's a love that would be painted in a gruesome light, and the whispers would speak of how sinful it was, the narrative spelled out simply as the wicked child of Satan corrupting Ponderosa Springs' most cherished angel. They would say I crept into her room at night and stole her away to my kingdom of eternal damnation, keeping her here forever.

Our story would be a villainous one for as long as we live here.

But they don't know what we did.

They don't know that she is more than just a flimsy angel.

She is a force with the power to destroy anything in her way. A phoenix from the ashes.

The Lilith to my Lucifer.

The one I would burn the entire goddamn planet down for.

In the opaque darkness, we found a love that could never be contained.

So to some, our love would be seen as unholy, an act against God himself, but to us?

It's more.

It's ours.

She was right. Tomorrow the birds will sing, and they will continue to as long as we're together.

“Because you were the only one worthy of keeping.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

eternal flame

sage

I look down at the hole dug into the wet ground, filled with a chestnut-brown coffin and covered in a thin layer of flowers.

I thought it was a waste of money to bury a person who had already been cremated for free, but it was written inside of his will that he was to be buried in the plot he'd already purchased years ago.

Funerals are a place where you're supposed to feel emotion. I'd felt broken and empty at Rosemary's, so much sadness inside of me that I could barely breathe.

But today, I feel nothing.

It's another Friday in Ponderosa Springs.

Maybe because my father had been dead to me far before he'd stopped breathing. I'd killed everything attached to him a long time ago, probably before I found out the deal he'd made.

Today, people cried for a man they thought was a hero. One who had died after falling asleep while cooking.

Today, the bad guy lost. Two of them.

But to the town, it was a tragic accident, one that Detective Finn Breck had bravely tried to prevent but had become trapped within the flames while trying to save my dad. Or at least, that's what I told police when they showed up.

I said exactly what Rook told me, that my father had invited Finn over along with Cain who wasn't able to make it, and I'd received an alert on my phone from the home security system that there was a fire detected.

We drove as fast as we could, but by the time we arrived, the house was engorged in flames. There was nothing we could do.

I was worried about what an autopsy might show, but apparently Doctor Howard Discil, our town's mortician owed a favor to the boys. No record of blunt force trauma or stab wounds were ever reported.

I made my eyes water with crocodile tears and sobbed like I was going for an Academy Award for best picture.

I didn't act today, I kept a passive look on my face the entire service as Rook stood beside me, holding my hand. To others, he was a supportive boyfriend, standing strong next to a girl in shock. I mean, I'd lost everything in their eyes.

My mother, my father, my sister.

They were all gone; they could understand my numbness. I was the girl who had nothing left.

But they were wrong.

Rook did not hold my hand for support.

I held his.

Because it felt good to stand in front of all the people who'd damned him and claim him as my own. Every broken, twisted piece. It was mine.

And yes, I had lost everything. But I had gained so much more.

"You okay?"

I look over at Briar and Lyra, seeing a friendship that I had desperately needed for so long. Two people who'd stood by me, who supported me. One of whom had stabbed a man in the neck. If that wasn't proof of loyalty, I wasn't sure what was.

I nod. "Are you alright?"

Lyra hadn't signed up for any of this, and yet now she had blood on her hands, forever living with the fact that she had taken a life in order to protect the people she cared about.

"I barely blinked," she mutters, biting the inside of her cheek. "I didn't even think about it before I did it. I just—"

"You did what you had to do," I reassure her, furrowing my eyebrows. "You don't need to make any apologies for doing what you need to in order to survive, Lyra."

"I'm not. It's not something I'm sorry for. I was just surprised..." She takes a breath. "How easy it was."

Lyra had always depicted herself as the shy bug nerd who enjoyed her life of invisibility. She was a ghost, and to everyone else, that was it.

Floating around, hovering, blending in.

But I was starting to gather that was only what she wanted people to think.

“I can’t believe Pierson hasn’t even thanked you for it,” Briar huffs, crossing her arms in front of her chest. “I get it, he’s a little fucked in the head, but it’s not hard to say, ‘Hey, thanks for saving my life.’”

“It’s Thatcher. He has no emotion. It would have been weird if he did say thank you,” I say with a laugh, having this weird moment of happiness even though I’m standing above my father’s grave.

“He does,” Lyra says, rocking on her heels a bit. “Death has a heart when it takes those who are suffering or the ones who are bad. If death has emotions, then so does he.”

There is a silence that falls for a moment.

“Well, he’s still an asshole,” Briar mumbles below her breath, and all of us do something that feels so foreign but so good.

We laugh.

It’s odd that one of my only real laughs happens while I’m standing above my father’s grave. But that’s what our friendship is.

Happiness even in moments of darkness.

I twirl the flower in my fingers, the one I’m supposed to drop inside of his grave, but instead, I walk a few steps to the right, standing in front of Rose’s grave, looking at her tombstone. I drag my fingers across the top and sigh.

Through everything, the only thing that had stayed constant was my desire for Rosie to be here. There was so much I wanted to tell her, so many things I never got to say. Lyra was right—death can be merciful, but it’s also cold.

It takes the ones we aren’t ready to lose with no compassion.

Gently, I lay the white rose on top of her tombstone because the other grave doesn’t deserve it.

Fingers lace with my own, and I don’t bother pulling away because I know that touch. Our skin melts together like clay, molding into one cohesive piece of art.

“Rose knew you liked me,” I say, turning to look at Rook’s handsome face.

“You told her about us?” His eyebrows furrow, and pain strikes my gut.

“No, I never...” I bite my bottom lip. “I never got the chance to tell her. I thought I would have more time.”

I hate that I thought I had more time. That she never knew how I felt about him. The man who’d brought the old Sage back to life and gave purpose to a new one.

“But she knew you liked me. After that day at Tilly’s, she said you don’t show interest in things that don’t excite you. I think she knew before we did.” I look at her tombstone. “She was good at knowing what people needed before they realized it themselves.”

“Yeah, she was,” he breathes, giving my hand a tight squeeze.

We stand there and I can feel him remembering her, just like I am. We bask in her memory, letting her light cover us in a second of happiness. I know she wouldn’t be angry at me for what happened to Silas, but I do know she would want me to be there for him.

Which I plan to do, come hell or high water.

Silas Hawthorne will not die a sad man.

She would not have wanted him to be alone for the rest of his life, and as perfect as they were together, I knew there was someone out there that could love him, just as Rosie had. I would make sure, no matter what, her request was met.

That no matter what, even if it’s without her, he will be happy.

“What about all those missing girls, Rook? We can’t just sit here with all we know, and not do something. They are just going to keep taking them. Girls just like Rose, stolen from their lives.” I breathe, imagining just how many families would never be able to find peace until their daughters were found.

“We are going to do something. We just need to figure out who we can trust, TG. When we do that, we will come clean about all we know.”

“But what about—”

“Even if it means we are caught for what we did. We won’t let them get away with it. I promise you.” He tells me, and his eyes burn with the only truth I’ll ever need.

I trusted him. No matter what, I trusted him.

“When we die, can we be buried together?” I ask.

A look of shock washes over his features. “You plan on dying sometime soon?”

I laugh. “No, but when we do eventually die, can we be buried together with our hands like this?” I raise our conjoined palms up in the air.

“As much as I’d love to cop a feel in a coffin, I’m being cremated, Theatre Geek.”

Of course he wants to go out in a blaze of fire.

I wouldn’t have him any other way though.

“Well, I want us to be mixed together, then. How I’m taken care of after I die doesn’t matter, I just, I don’t want to be alone.” I look at him, catching the embers in his eyes with my heart. “My biggest regret is knowing Rosie died alone. We came into the world together and left it separately. I don’t want to be alone.”

He brings our hands to his mouth, pressing a searing kiss to the top of my fingers.

“You will never be alone again. Never. Our ashes will be combined,” He pulls me close with the leverage of his grip, and I can smell his smokey scent on my tongue. “So that no matter where we rise from them, we will do it together. Fate might not have chosen me to bear your soul mark, but I will make sure it knows that in this life and all the ones after, I will always be yours. I always have been.”

Somewhere, I can hear Shakespeare crying that we’d defied his odds. We are the star-crossed lovers who were doomed from the start, and here we stand.

Hand in hand.

All the dead poets who wrote of sweet, gentle love cry out in disgust at our sick, twisted version of the emotion.

But it’s us.

And we are the eternal flame.

Forever.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

inside the mind of a killer

thatcher

My father writes me letters.

Articulate, well-structured accounts of what his days are like. How they drag by and what he spends his free time doing. Sometimes, it feels like he's merely on a superficial vacation on a stranded island.

That's how regular the conversation is.

If someone else were to pick them up and follow his cursive writing to the very last line, they would never suspect he was locked inside of a concrete box biding his time on death row.

That's how normal he is. How normal he has always been.

When will society learn that the monsters of the world are not ones with yellow teeth and sharp claws? How many documentaries must we watch until we see the truth, see us for what we really are?

We are the leaders of the free world. Your neighbor who hosts summer BBQs, husbands with families, politicians, doctors.

We don't live underneath your bed or in your closet—that's too easy. It's not complex enough for us.

No, we stand in the daylight of your homes, out in the open. Examining your lives, learning every single day how to chameleon ourselves into what you deem a "good person." The kind of person you trust, the person you let inside your home for coffee, the person you least expect to ruthlessly murder you on your bedroom floor.

The longer it takes for humanity to comprehend these things, the more of an advantage we have over them.

The earth gives beneath the weight of my walk. Mud tints the sides of my Dior derby shoes, and I am already planning on throwing these away as soon as I can get them off my feet.

I do not like being contaminated. Clutter and dirt physically repulse me.

I live for cleanliness. Organization. Structure.

White satin sheets, white blanket that is bleached on Sundays at precisely ten in the morning. A strict workout that occurs every day just before sunrise. The same breakfast, the same routine, an unwavering agenda that I never stray from.

My life is a series of skillfully designed moments. Everything I do, everything I say, has an objective.

Why waste time, breath, money on something that isn't?

Much to my distaste, I wade through the trees anyway. Because there is something I need to...dissect.

I sense a summer breeze brush across my face, a hint of a floral scent that is overrun by the musky scent of pine. These are things I notice but don't feel. Not the way most people do.

The forest begins to open up, the dated mausoleum catching the sun. All those people are forgotten, rotting inside. It's a shame they never removed the bodies.

Just outside the door to the macabre structure, I see what I have come here for.

She's kneeling on the wet ground, little yellow rainboots peeking out from beneath. That horrendous fisherman's hat she wears adorns the top of her head, doing a terrible job at containing those disobedient curls she very clearly does not maintain.

Lyra Abbott nauseates me.

Always walking around with dirt on her clothing, sticky fingers from those cherries she inhales by the dozen, and she has this strange fixation with insects that makes me ill. Everything she does, everything she is, counteracts me.

She is sodium, and I am potassium.

She is ammonium hydroxide, and I am acetic acid.

Seeing her live so proudly with her mucky habits and contaminated interests makes me want to drown myself in bleach. Scrub my eyeballs with it until I can't see her. Until she is wiped clean from me entirely.

I don't like the way she looks at me and how every time it makes me feel tainted.

The way she stood over me as Finn's blood spurted from his jugular vein made me feel unsettled, soaking me in the thick, decadent, crimson liquid I'm so fond of. I might have enjoyed that moment had I not seen the look on her face.

People should not have that sort of reaction after killing someone.

She should have gone into shock, cried, passed out.

Not her.

No, Lyra looked relieved. Delight sparkled on her face, and a sense of calm descended on her shoulders. She enjoyed killing him, and I think if given the opportunity, she would do it again. It was that face that made me need answers.

I'd done a well enough job at blatantly ignoring her, even when I could detect her near me, feel her stare on my skin. I'm too curious to disregard her now.

Could she be on the other side of my spectrum?

Could my father have created another version of me with the heinous crime he'd committed against her mother?

I was a born psychopath. I knew that already. I'd accepted that a long time ago.

But she, could she counteract that?

The made sociopath.

Nature vs nurture.

Did being stranded for an entire day next to her mother's lifeless and bloodstained body turn her into some form of anomaly? Had my father unknowingly connected us through his gruesome hobby?

A branch cracks beneath my feet, and she turns around to investigate the sound.

Her body freezes, and I grin coldly.

We are all six minutes away from death every time we wake up.

Breathing resets that clock.

I am the hands that stop it.

"I think it's time we finally had a chat, my dearest phantom."

the end

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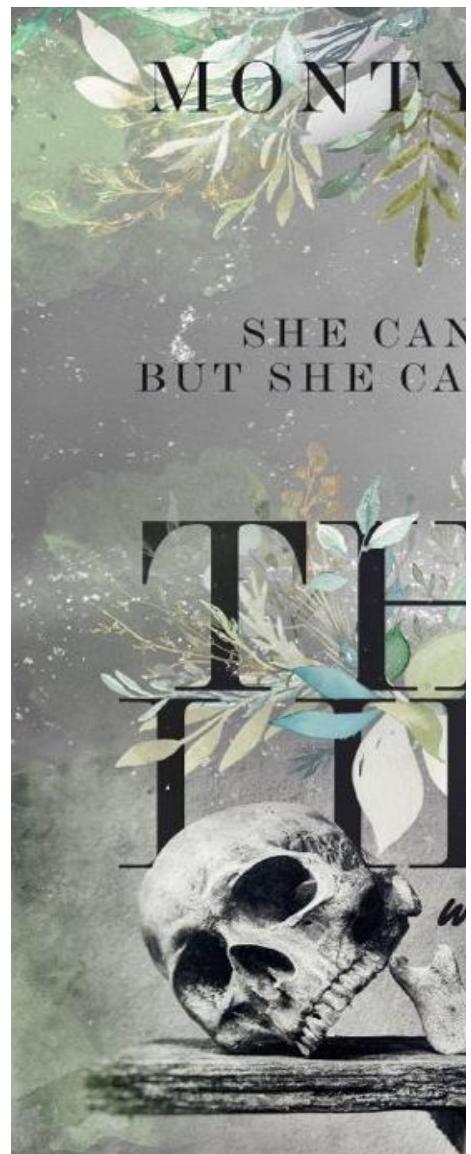
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CHAPTER

when darkness calls you home

ONE

allistar

I always knew I was born with a ravenous appetite for violence.
Destined to be the black sheep of my family.

They should learn to warn others about the children that are left to cultivate with the absence of light. When you take away their luster, the darkness doesn't just become a part of them, they become the darkness.

Power rippled through my arm as I felt this kid's nose shatter. My knuckles dug into the flesh of his face chasing the only thing that could sustain my hunger.

Pain.

The tall, lanky moron who'd thought it would be a good idea to challenge me fell hard to the ground with a thud.

In official mixed martial arts you're supposed to stop when your opponent falls that hard.

Fortunately for me, this is The Graveyard. The abandoned racetrack on the outskirts of town, where kids gather from surrounding areas in search of trouble. Illegal street racing, fights, drugs, and half naked girls. It's the

Garden of Eden for rich kids. The grass in the middle of the cracked asphalt circle was where the fights took place, all the while engines roared and echoed seeing whose daddy bought machine would pass the finish line first.

The Graveyard is the place you come to get buried. Especially if you're up against me.

I charge forward mounting him while pressing my knee so far into his gut I could feel his organs shift below me. My agile fists, heaving punch after punch to his already inflamed face. My breaths rush out methodically, each point of contact I let out another breath. There are hands grabbing at my shoulders, clawing at me to stop.

I don't care, it only makes my knee press harder. My fists bludgeon him mercilessly.

Why should I let up because he was stupid enough to step into this ring with me?

Seems like a personal problem.

My heart is thrashing inside my chest, the energy coursing through my veins like drums in my ears. It blends with the screams of the people around us, the revved engines, and the smell of oil.

Fuck, what I would give to feel like this every second of the day.

I deliver a right hook, watching as my ring imprints my initials onto the tender skin of his cheek, splitting it right open above the letters A.C.

A gush of searing blood splatters across my chest from his face. A ferocious roar rips through me, the crimson liquid acting as gasoline to the flames inside my body. It wasn't the blood I wanted though. I wanted his agony. I wanted to see him hurt. I wanted to know that he'd need to be carried to his car tonight, driven home and he'd probably crawl to his fucking bed. Where he'd stay for the next week because the bruises I imprinted were too much to handle.

It made chills speed down my spine.

That's my not so secret, secret.

I'm always, always angry.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Caldwell, let him up! That's enough, man!" The voice rings between my ears, but I throw one last punch, before shrugging the eager hands off my skin.

The circle of people around us chant for the brutality that had just taken place. The inability to turn away from tragedy or disaster. All of them

are the same as me on the inside, addicted to the cruelty. They're just too afraid to admit it.

I hate cowards. And every goddamn person in this fucking town is one.

Monsters behind masks terrified of their neighbors seeing the skeletons they keep shoving into their closets. What they don't know is you can't keep anything a secret in Ponderosa Springs. Not for long.

I know that better than anyone.

Shades of red flash behind my eyes as I stand up, hot spit coming from my mouth and landing right next to his groaning body. He's lucky he's able to make noises, even more fortunate he isn't dead.

Besides the blood on my chest, there isn't a mark on my skin. Which almost makes me angrier. Nothing challenges me anymore. I clench my jaw, as I turn around, the mass of people parting like the Red Sea, leaving me an open pathway to exit.

"Money for the bets." One of the older guys running this chaotic shit, presses crumpled up bills into my chest. I look down at it, then back at him.

"Keep it." I grunt.

I didn't need or want that money. He could do fuck all with it, I didn't fight for cash. I fought because if I didn't, I'd kill someone.

I quickly scoop up my leather jacket, shrugging it easily over my shoulders. My t-shirt was somewhere in the muddy grass and I didn't feel the need to search for it.

My breathing begins to regulate as I make my way to my car. Even if the fight was bland, releasing even just a little of my fury would mean I could sleep tonight. With everything going on, sleep was not something I could afford to lose.

Music poured from my speakers as soon as I turned the key over. The sound heavy and exhilarating. My left-hand grips the wheel tightly, I can faintly see the white beneath my blood-soaked knuckles. They throb so hard that it almost feels good.

I quickly throw it into gear, ready to make the drive to my parents' home. Twenty-eight thousand square feet, nine main bedrooms, ten spares, seven bathrooms, twenty-six acres, and there still isn't enough space between myself and my family. My grip tightens, I was supposed to be on a flight to the East Coast next month. Putting an entire country between them and me.

Instead, I'm trapped here for another year at least, chasing a ghost.

Making a hard right I turn into our driveway. One that's covered by towering trees, the paved road stopped momentarily by the large steel gate blocking the entrance. I click the button on my remote to automatically open them, pulling past them and into my family's estate.

Pulling around the tacky marble fountain in front, I slide into my parking spot easily. None of the usual cars are here, meaning no one's home. It wouldn't matter anyway, even when they are here, I'm invisible to them.

I always have been.

Lightning cracks across the sky behind the house, lighting up the fog for a split second before thunder rattles the ground beneath my feet as I walk towards the door. The keypad glows under my touch, entering my passcode and stepping inside.

When my parents and brother are here, this house is shining with light. Its glow can be seen through the trees on the road. Extravagant parties, celebrating a clipped toenail, family dinners that I'm never invited to. But when they are gone, it's just me and the dark.

My boots echo off the floor, step by step until I'm in the kitchen turning the faucet on. I run my swollen hands beneath the lukewarm water. The blood begins to flow down the drain, some of it anyway. There is some stuck between my fingers, already dried.

There shouldn't be noise inside the house. It should be how it always is when I'm here.

Dead silence.

Except there isn't. My ears twitch, picking up on the familiar click, followed by a whoosh at the lighting of the flint.

"Trying to scare me?" I say out loud, drying my hands slowly before I turn around.

I peer into the dark of the parlor room, Rook's face illuminated by the single flame of his zippo as he flips it across his knuckles and through his fingers. I spot the single diamond strike match resting in his mouth, the scarlet tip peeping out of the side.

He's leaning back in the leather beveled chair, arms resting on the sides as he stares at me through the dark.

"If I was, you wouldn't have heard me." He retorts.

I navigate myself into the chair across from him. Pulling the lamp string, illuminating the room in an amber glow. Just as I sink into the stale material, resting my arms on my knees, I hear footsteps approach behind me. I don't bother looking over my shoulder.

"Thatch." I greet, as I see his shadow walk past me, taking the seat to our left.

At six-four, Thatcher is the tallest one of the group. Not like he needs his size to scare anyone.

He slings one leg over the other, his ankle resting on his knee, "Get your rocks off battering some poor kid's head in, Ali?"

I grind my teeth, the pompous asshole knew I hated being called that. Known that as long as we've been friends, but it wouldn't be him if he wasn't trying to get underneath *someone's* skin.

You see, Thatcher's veins were constantly pumping with ice water and mine were always boiling.

"You really wanna talk about what gets people off, Thatcher?" I raise one eyebrow at him, taking in his Armani suit. I'd learned to stop questioning his extravagant wardrobe a long time ago.

"I wouldn't wanna give you nightmares." He smirks, and I can't help the matching one that appears on mine.

I'd be lying if I said I haven't wanted to rip each of their heads off at some point. We knew how to push each others' buttons. However, right now, I was reminded of how I'd kill anyone who'd try to do the same.

It's why I'm willing to stay in this godforsaken town because one of our own had been scorned.

"Where is Silas?" I ask.

"Sleeping for the first time in, fuck I don't even know." Rook answers.

"Don't be naive, Rook. Silas doesn't sleep anymore. When he does, he sees her. We all know that." Thatcher interjects, reminding us all why we are here in the first place.

The grandfather clock in the hallway chimes signaling that midnight has reached us. The weight of his words pilfers into the room. The wrath I'd just tried to release earlier, started to creep back up. I could feel the flames licking my heels, the copper taste in my mouth.

“Speaking of her.” Rook reaches forward, tossing a cream-colored folder onto the table in the middle of all of us. Perks of being the district attorney’s son.

I lean forward, grabbing it up, “You look inside yet?”

He shakes his head, “Wanted to wait until we were together.” Raising up a bit, he reaches into his back pocket grabbing the white pack of cigarettes. Pulling a single one out, raking a hand through his long brown hair.

“Mind?” He asks, referring to the smoke.

“Burn it down for all I care.” I say honestly. Rook leans back in the chair pulling the match from his mouth and lighting it with his fingers, a trick he’d taught himself when we were at summer camp. He lights the end, inhaling deeply a cloud of smoke gathering around his face.

Since I was six years old the only things I’d ever cared about was Rook, Thatcher, and Silas. We’d sworn to protect each other always, even if it meant wreaking havoc on others in the process. Nothing else mattered besides them, to any of us.

You never see one of us without the others, we are the kids that were never made to be good. We were always meant to be crooked and broken.

“We are all aware of what will happen when we start looking into this, correct?” Thatch asks, “There will be blood on all of our hands. Not just the little destruction we’ve done around town all our lives. We won’t be burning down historic churches or playing wicked games. We will be killing someone.”

We should flinch or cringe at the idea of taking someone’s life. But we all knew what each other was capable of.

“It’s their own fault. They should’ve known better than to hurt someone we care about.”

I remember that night. I remember the smell of that house we found her in. Like pig shit and vomit. A trap house where druggies hide out and shoot their liquid gold. I remember what her body looked like, bent and left hopelessly on the filthy ground.

Like an angel who’d gotten lost and found herself in Hell. She didn’t deserve to die there. And Silas didn’t deserve to find her like that.

I could still hear his screams when I shut my eyes. Hours and hours of shouts. A wounded beast whose pain was growing into unfiltered rage. An

emotion that coursed through all of us.

“We find out who did it. We end them. And he can move on. He’ll be able to move forward.”

“He won’t move on.” I shake my head, “Even if we find what we are looking for. You don’t move on from something like this.”

I open the folder, revealing the white pages stuck between. The patient's name in black, bold letters that make my jaw twitch. Rosemary Paige Donahue. My eyes scan through the report, all the questions asked. Was the patient’s death expected? No. Was ACLS performed? Yes (By one of my best friends until we pulled him off her, I note). Flipping to the next page I find the drawing of a body from the front and back, but instead of having circles around certain areas like I assumed it would. It was blank.

My eyebrows inch together as I read the coroner’s findings,

No visible signs of trauma or contusions.

So the scratch marks on her hands? The purple circles from the obvious bruising on her arms? I saw those. They were there.

The most significant finding on the autopsy was the presences of methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) in the patient’s system. After a thorough investigation, it is my conclusion that the amount ingested caused heatstroke in the patient. The core body temperature was raised leading to cardiac arrest which led to death. No foul play was detected.

So the dirt underneath her fingernails, like she’d be clawing at something? That was just a coincidence? The police didn’t investigate further into the fact Rose had never touched drugs up to that point?

There were things that weren’t adding up. That wasn’t sitting right with me.

“Here genius, you read it. Tell me what you think.” I toss the files at Thatcher, watching as he rests his hand on his chin while his eyes scan across the paper.

“No evidence of foul play? No documentation of the bruises or the marks on her skin?” He says out loud and I nod in silent agreement.

“We saw her body. I don’t know about you two, but I’ve got twenty-twenty vision. Rose was not there on her own free will. Nor did she die willingly. She never even went to parties with us, made Si stay home with

her all the time. Is Ponderosa Springs really trying to hide the murder of the mayor's daughter?" Rook comments, taking another puff of his cancer stick. One that I'm about to steal for myself.

Rose, was not only Silas's girlfriend, she'd become...one of us. Slowly she'd weaseled her way into our group, making herself a friend. We wouldn't admit it out loud, but we all cared for her like a sister.

Her death was eating at all of us.

"Wouldn't be the worst scandal here."

"So if a pathologist would lie about something like defense wounds and foul play, what else is he covering up? Better yet, *who* is he covering up for?" Thatcher asks.

"I think we should pay the good doctor a visit." I scan my eyes across my two friends. Rook's mouth quirking up into a smile as he flips his zippo across his fingers, snapping it shut.

"Don't have to tell me twice." He mutters.

Thatcher grins sharply, "As long as I get to cut first."

We made a deal.

A promise to one of our best friends, that we'd figure out who did this to his girl. Left her dead and dirty. All of us giving up our plans to leave this toxic place for an entire year, just to get the revenge he needed.

Not even God could save the people who got in the way of that.

AFTERWORD

This series almost didn't happen.

Spoiler alert: it definitely did.

I was stuck in this place late last year trying to figure out what I wanted to do after my hockey series. There were a lot of different things I wanted to try, different directions I could have gone with, opinions I could have taken.

But I went with the one that wouldn't leave me no matter how hard I tried to shake it.

Dark romance was a complete left turn from my early work, and it was a risk changing genres so early in my career, when readers were just starting to trust my words and the plot lines I laid out.

However, I always knew the dark was where I was meant to thrive. Where I wanted to exist.

I knew it from the second I read a short story by Stephen King called *The Mangler*. I was thirteen, up past my bedtime and hiding beneath my blankets. I was engrossed, shocked, and totally in love with the fear. When I finished it, I realized that I had just spent thirty minutes being entertained by a piece of laundromat machinery that was possessed by a demon. I also spent the next two years avoiding laundromats at all costs, but that's not the point. The point is, I wanted to write stories that shocked people. That scared them. Made them question their morals and beliefs. I wanted to be the friend who went first inside of the haunted house, pulling you along even if it got too much.

So what I'm saying here is this.

Do it. Write the fucking book.

Life is too short to waste passion and creativity. The world can always use what you have to give it.

I'm blessed to have so many people to thank, so I'm going to do that now. (You can skip if you'd like, but I think this is the best part.)

Fletcher, my golden boy, you're the light in my darkness. Always.

Stevie, my organizational machine. You're the best. Thanks for reminding me to hydrate and telling me when I need to post on social media because I've been gone for too long.

Kristin, Kat, JC, I love you girls and our MC. Thank you for understanding when I disappear into my own head and knowing when to

pull me out of it.

Trilina, what a fucking queen you are. For all the two-hour-long phone calls, for being honest with me, for believing in these books. You're in my corner always, and I'm in yours.

Michelle and Saffron, for loving Rook and Sage before the book even started. For being there through all the ups and all the downs. (There were a lot of downs, people). I love you two.

Everyone who helped put this book together. Formatters, editors, cover designers, I'm in debt forever.

And you, most of all you, the readers. The old, the new, and all the ones I haven't met yet. You are the reason I publish these things, because if I'm honest, I'd write even if I didn't. But you choose to read them, you pick them up, and you follow me on every single adventure. I'm thankful for every last one of you.

With all the love in my dark loving heart,

MJ

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The Fury Series

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Ice Hearts
Shattered Ice
Blind Pass

The Fury is a series of interconnected, standalone, angsty Hockey romances that each feature sexy love stories between hot-heated alpha males and the strong women who steal their hearts on and off the ice.

Courage for Fools

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Author of edgy romance about broken heroes and the lovers who help them find their HEA's. Monty Jay likes to describe herself as a punk rock kid, with the soul of a Wild Child who has a Red Bull addiction.

When she isn't writing she can be found reading anything Stephen King, getting a tattoo, or spending time with family.

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